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OR, THE RUCTION at LAKE TULARE.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, "GUTTA JOHN," "SHADOWING A SHADOW,"
"OLD RIDDLES," "REDLIGHT RALPH,"
"FIGHTING HARRY," "SANDY SAM,"
"DISCO DAN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ENTERTAINED LIKE PRINCES.

"Sweet pertaters!"

"Hey? What am dat yo' say?"

"I said 'sweet pertaters,' which is French for Great Scott! See here, my calla lily, I admit that I'm a tenderfoot, as you say out here, but I'm not so tender that you can put that story down my neck."



PULLING THE SHIRT OPEN, BILLY REACHED IN WITH HIS HAT AND FANNED OUT THE LIGHT.

"Oh! but it am so, sah; I hope ter die if it ain't."

"What! you mean to say that that mountain over there is fifty miles away?"

"Hit am all ob dat, and inebby funder, too."

Broadway Billy looked searchingly at Pompey Daylight, to find out whether he meant what he said, or was joking. Then, turning to Skinny, he demanded:

"Say, my gay an' festive feather-weight, what do you think about it?"

"It is pretty hard to believe," Skinny averred.

"That is just what I think of it, too. Say, lily-white, ain't you stretchin' it a little? Now if you had said ten miles, then I might swoller it; but fifty—"

He shook his head.

"Oh! but hit am so, an' yo' kin ask Senor Gallardo, or Dona Isidora if it baint. Pompey wouldn't lie to yo', nohow. Why, if yo' was ter set out ter walk to dat mounting dis minnit, you would hab to stir yo' stumps most mighty lively to git dar by dark, an' I done tol' yo'."

It was early morning.

Billy and Skinny had just got up and gone down to the broad piazza of the large farm mansion, where they entered into conversation with the one colored servant of the place, Pompey Daylight as he was christened—or Pomp for short.

They were at the big Cantatriz estate, down in south central California, at a point between the Southern Pacific Railroad and the north end of Tulare Lake. They had arrived there after dark on the previous night, in company with their host and hostess, and this was about their first view of their surroundings.

On getting up and looking out of the windows, a vast panorama of beauty was spread before their eyes. The Cantatriz farm comprised some sixteen thousand acres, and the sight of it, as the two boys looked around, was astonishing. It was something far beyond their dreams. Great plains of waving wheat lay before them, seemingly without limit, and there was fruit of almost all kinds in abundance. It was about as near an ideal Paradise, in appearance, as can be imagined.

The two lads were struck forcibly with the beauty of the snow-capped mountains in the distance, and had agreed between themselves that they must be about five miles away, and that after breakfast they would take a walk over to them and come back in time for dinner. When, on going down to the piazza, however, they asked the colored man about it, his assertion that the mountains were fifty miles away amazed them. They could not credit it. It did not look possible, but it was the fact, for the mountains in question were not less than forty miles distant at the nearest point.

"Well, I suppose we'll have to take your word for it, Mr. Sunrise—"

"Haw, haw, haw!" the darky interrupted with a laugh, "my name ain't Sunrise, sah; hit am Daylight."

"Excuse me," Billy apologized; "I was sure the sun had something to do with it, anyhow. As I was saying, we'll take your word for it, but it's going against the very evidence of sight. By the way, what water is that off to the south there? It looks like a sizable pond."

"Dat, sah? Dat am Tulare, sho's you's born!"

"Too-lay-re, is it? Now I guess I don't understand that kind of langwidge, Mr. Daybreak. You'll have ter talk plain Uncle Sam to me. If that is Spanish for mill-pond, you'll have ter say mill-pond, that's all."

The black fellow grinned, showing his ivories to good effect.

"Yo' don't git onto my name yit," he reminded. "Hit am Daylight. I is talkin' plain United States to yo', and dat am de name ob de water yo' see. Tulare Lake hit am called an' it am bigger 'an it 'pears to be from here. Hit am said to be about five hundred miles in de air."

"Five hundred miles in the air! I don't understand this time, and that's a fact. It don't look to be up in the air at all. What d'ye mean, anyhow?"

Just then a merry laugh interrupted, and the pretty bride, Isidora Gallardo, nee Cantatriz, joined them.

Billy and Skinny greeted her politely, and she asked:

"What was Pompey telling you about Tulare being in the air?"

"Why, he says it is five hundred miles in the air," answered Billy.

"I thought that was what he said," the lady observed, and again she laughed. "He no doubt means five hundred miles in *area*, for that is said to be the size of the lake."

"Yas, dat am what I tol' de young ge'man," Pomp declared.

They laughed, and the lady further inquired how the lads had rested, and what they thought of the place.

"Oh! we slept immense!" Billy cried; "at any rate I did, and I guess Skinny did, too. I believe he'd weigh an ounce heavier this morning. As to the place, it is a reg'lar Garden of Eden of modern times. I don't wonder that rascally uncle of yours wanted ter get his grip on it. But, say, is Mr. Daytime right in—"

"Daylight, sah," the darky quickly corrected.

"So it is, and I beg yer pardon again, Pomp, old boy. But, is he right, Mrs. Gallardo, in saying that those mountains are fifty miles away?"

"Yes, he is right," was the reply. "I guess they are not much nearer than that, if any."

"Well, I'll never believe my eyes again, that's all."

"They do look to be much nearer, but it is deceptive. Here comes Mr. Gallardo."

Pablo Gallardo, the happy bridegroom, just then came out of the house to join his pretty wife.

He greeted the lad heartily, too, and after talking for about twenty minutes all went in to breakfast.

Broadway Billy and Skinny were in "high clover," here. They were being entertained like princes.

While at the table, a trip to the lake was planned for the day's pleasure, and another trip to the big trees over along the mountains, away to the north-west, was mentioned for the day following.

Dona Isidora had a pretty little yacht on the lake, and a sail in that, with the lady herself as captain, promised enjoyment.

Then the other trip to the mountains, which meant three days and two nights out of doors, was not to be despised.

The size of the Cantatriz estate has been mentioned. It was all the property of the pretty bride, whose happy rescue from her villainous uncle by Broadway Billy and Skinny has been chronicled. But her husband was not by any means poor, for he owned another estate almost as extensive.

There were about thirty employees on the farm or ranch of one kind and another, and all but two were under the directions of an overseer, or superintendent, named Marcos Veedor.

This man was a Mexican, a dark-browed fellow, who, since the death of the late Senor Cantatriz, had ruled the farm in his own way.

He knew his business well enough, undoubtedly, but was too severe and overbearing. He was not liked.

He had had a fondness for Isidora, and on one occasion had hinted at his love; but, only once.

On that occasion he had been warned that if he ever mentioned it again he would be dismissed immediately, and not wanting to lose his place, had wisely kept his head closed upon that subject.

Most of the other employees were Mexicans and Spaniards, though there were three or four Americans among them, and one Irishman.

The Irishman's name was Patsey McGinty.

About the time she was through breakfast on this bright morning, Isidora sent for Pompey Daylight, and directed him to tell the overseer to come into the house.

In a little time he presented himself in the breakfast-room, where Cantatriz had been in the habit of giving him directions about the business of the day.

When he entered he greeted Isidora respectfully, uttered a word of congratulation, and then stood waiting to hear what she had to say.

"Thank you, Veedor," she responded; and then came immediately to business.

She introduced the man to her husband, told what position he held, and informed the overseer that he was to consider himself under the direction of Mr. Gallardo in all things, and must account to him for all expenses and revenues.

With that she dismissed him, and he retired with a deeper frown upon his surly face than he had had on entering.

Broadway Billy looked after him, and mentally decided that he was a "bad egg," and Billy was never far wrong as a character-reader.

Only two men about the place were not under this overseer, and these were Pompey Daylight and Patsey McGinty. Pompey was, or rather had been, a sort of personal servant to Mr. Cantatriz, and was now supposed to hold about the same relation to Isidora. Patsey had charge of the stables where the better horses were kept, and was something of a lord over that domain.

Breakfast over, Billy and Skinny went to take a look around the place, with the darky as their guide, and with full leave to do pretty much as they pleased.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy presently broke out, "but this is what I call living, Skinny! If a fellow couldn't be happy in a situation like this, I'd like to know what would please him, that's all. He wouldn't be satisfied with Eden."

"He would be a hog, and that's putting it plain," Skinny declared.

"I guess you've hit it about right," agreed Billy. "Say, though, my gay an' festive shadder," he added, "I would feel easier if you would keep in th' middle of th' lane here. If you git out there in th' wheat, we'd never find ye. One of th' grains would hide ye jest as 'fectually as th' big trees they tell us about."

"Oh! you shut up!" Skinny snapped back.

Pompey laughed heartily. Billy was something new in his experience, and the lad kept the darky grinning or roaring all the time.

"Oh! it's so, Mr. Moonlight, and—"

"Golly sakes!" Pompey protested, "yo' is gettin' worse an' worse about my name, yo' is. Hit am Daylight—nuffin' mor'n Pompey Daylight, an' nuffin' less, sah!"

"That's so, that's so, Pomp, old fellow, and you'll have ter excuse my blunders. If I keep on I'll have ter jest call ye Pomp for short, and let it go at that. But, I was goin' ter tell ye about Skinny. Did ye ever see sich a shadder, alive, before? One day I was pickin' my teeth with a quill pick, an' I started ter whistle with th' quill in my mouth. All of a sudden I sucked somethin' inter that quill, and what d'ye think it was?"

The darky was holding his sides and laughing ready to burst, and Skinny was uttering his protests strongly.

"If lies will send you to th' bad place, Billy," Skinny declared, "that's th' place you're booked fer."

"Oh! but this ain't no lie!" Billy protested. "It is th' truth, Mr. Sunbeam, and I'll vouch fer it, too. Come, what d'ye think I sucked inter that quill?"

Pompey was easily tickled, and he went off into another fit, but when he was able to speak, he said:

"Oh! I s'pose you is goin' ter say hit was de boy, here."

"Nonsense!" Billy exclaimed; "it was a fly."

Pompey went off into another fit, Skinny gave Billy a playful kick, and Billy was about to tell something more when an interruption occurred. A horseman was coming up the lane through the wheat, running at full speed, and the horse was flecked with flying foam.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOYS IN THE SADDLE.

"SWEET pertaters!" cried Broadway Billy. "Get out of th' road, Skinny, or you are a goner!"

Even as he spoke he was losing no time in taking the same advice to himself.

"Golly!" exclaimed Pompey Daylight, "but dat am Massa Millwall! I wonder what he kin be in sich a hurry about?"

"Who is he?" asked Billy.

"He am a rich farmer what live up de valley. De estate of Senor Diego Macareno j'ine dis one, and de next one am dat ob Massa Millwall."

By the time this explanation had been given, the horseman was upon them.

"Pomp," he called out, as he reined his horse to a stop, "where is Veedor? I want to see him as quick as possible."

He was a man of fifty or fifty five, fine-looking and of solid build. He had a pleasing face, though now it was slightly pale and marked with lines of stern determination.

"I reckons he am about de stables, sah, 'bout dis time," the darky responded.

"Good enough; I'll find him."

"De Senorita Isidora am at home now," the darky informed the horseman.

"That so? When did she come?"

"Last night, sah; an' she am married, an' her husband am with her."

"Ha! this is new! Who is her husband?"

"Senor Pablo Gallardo, sah."

"That is good! I am glad to hear it! I was afraid she had married that rascally uncle of hers. But, I must push on."

He touched his horse with the whip, and was off again.

Pompey Daylight looked after him for a moment, and then with a shake of his head, muttered:

"I don't see what kin make Massa Millwall in such a hurry like dat. Must be sumfin' wrong over to his place, I opine, shua."

"Why didn't ye ask him?" demanded Billy. "Oh! dat would neber do! He might cut a flick with his whip, an' tell me mind my own business."

"S'pose we move back toward the house," Billy suggested. "I feel kinder interested in this mystery, as I allus am, and I'd like ter know what's up. You kin bet a penny I won't stop about askin' questions. That's a way I have. Sweet pertaters! if a feller couldn't ask questions he wouldn't know anything. Come on, Sunshine, and—"

"Lamb ob goodness!" exclaimed the darky, "hain't yo' neber gwine git my name right? Hit am Daylight, sah, and hit ain't nuffin' else."

"Sweet pertaters! is it possible that I am off th' track again, Pomp? Strange that that name of yours won't skip off o' my tongue right-end first. Seems it's bound ter git mixed. I'll try ter remember it now, and git it right every time. It ain't sich a hard name, Daybright ain't, an'—"

"No, no! Hit am Daylight!"

"I guess I'd better give it up as a bad job, Pomp, and not try ter be perlit. I'll call ye Pomp."

"All right, sah, I is willin'; dats 'spectable name, sah!"

"If you won't take offense, Pomp, I think I can explain how it is that I get it mixed up so."

"Golly! yo' can't 'fend Pompey Daylight, sah. What am de reason dat yo' hab in mind?"

"Why, your name is so unlike your nature, you see. It is the joining of extremes, as it were, to be poetical. Your name is light, while you—well, you are not quite so light."

"Haw, haw, haw! Dat must be hit, I 'pine, sah."

The darky took it all in good part, and they continued on their way to the house, or hacienda.

In the mean time Caleb Millwall had reached there, and had brought his horse to a stop near the piazza, where the happy, newly-married couple were seated, enjoying the exhilarating morning air.

"Why, Senor Millwall, what is the matter?" Isidora eagerly inquired, as she ran lightly down the steps, her husband following her with a similar question upon his lips.

They were both well known to the solid Californian.

Mr. Millwall greeted them warmly, congratulated them heartily, and then answered their question.

"Why," he explained, now hurriedly, "my two nieces are missing, and I don't know where they can be. I am here to see if I can borrow your hounds, to track them. I am afraid they have met with with foul play."

"*Cascaras!*" cried Pablo Gallardo, using the Spanish synonym for our "zounds!" "Where do you imagine they can be?"

"That is what I can't imagine at all," was the response.

"Erica and Alma missing!" cried Isidora. "What can have happened to them? You shall have the bounds, of course, and that immediately."

She sprung into the hall, soon returning with a horn in hand, upon which she blew a sharp blast.

In a few moments a Spanish employee came running from the direction of the stables, and to him she gave some hurried directions in his own language. He went off in haste, then, and the lady turned to Mr. Millwall, to whom her husband was talking earnestly.

"When were the ladies missing?" she inquired.

"They were missing at breakfast, as I have just explained to Pablo," was the response. "Mrs. Millwall sent right to their room, for it was something unusual for them to be late, but they were not found there. We do not know what to make of it."

"They may have gone riding."

"No, for their horses are at home. Besides, they never went without letting us know about it."

"Well, it is strange," mused Isidora, and I am greatly worried. I hope you will find them at home when you return."

"And I hope so too, but I am afraid that there is trouble back of it somewhere or other. I am afraid that there is foul play at work."

"What leads you to think that?"

"Well, to be frank with you, my overseer, Ricardo Tolego, is missing too. He has been making himself too attentive to Alma, of late, and only last week I told him I'd shoot him if he ever spoke to her again."

"That makes it look serious indeed," remarked Gallardo. "I hope it will not turn out as bad as it looks. We will— But here comes

Pedro with the dogs— No, he has not got them! What is the matter with the fellow?"

The Spaniard came running up, pale and half out of breath, and exclaimed something in Spanish.

"What! the dogs dead!" cried Isidora.

"*Si, Dona*, both dead," answering part in English this time.

The lady looked greatly concerned and troubled. The two pet hounds of the place dead! It did not seem possible.

"What caused their death?" she asked.

"I do not know," was the reply. "They are both dead and cold, as though they had been dead for some time."

"That blocks me off," Mr. Millwall almost groaned. "I hoped everything, if once I got those dogs."

"Go," ordered Isidora, to the man, "and send the overseer to me."

"There is something peculiar about this," muttered Pablo Gallardo. "It looks to me as though those dogs may have been killed by some one who might have reason to dread them."

"And so it looks to me," agreed Isidora. "Veedor shall answer for their death, for he should know something about it."

Just then Billy, Skinny, and Pompey Daylight, came up.

Broadway Billy saw at a glance that something of a serious nature was "in the wind," as he remarked to Skinny, aside.

"Who is it that is dead?" Billy asked respectfully, addressing Gallardo.

"Hal here you are, eh?" Pablo exclaimed.

"Why, two favorite dogs have been killed, as we suspect; killed, perhaps, to prevent their being put upon the track of a rascal whom this gentleman suspects of having stolen his two nieces. Let me introduce you to Mr. Millwall."

And that Gallardo proceeded to do, with many more words than we care to quote at length. He told something about Billy's detective ability, and how he had been the means of rescuing the pretty Isidora from danger as well as foiling her rascally uncle.

Billy blushed with modesty, and tried to deny that he was quite so famous as Mr. Gallardo would make him appear, but when Gallardo mentioned the mark of favor that had been shown him by the police chief, then Mr. Millwall was decidedly interested.

He was about to say something, when the overseer, Veedor, came up, bringing with him one of the men of the farm.

He saluted, and said:

"I am here, lady."

"What do you know about the death of the dogs?" Isidora demanded.

"I know nothing about it," was the answer, with just a touch of scorn; "I am not a keeper of dogs. I have brought their keeper to answer to you."

"Then you knew that they were dead?"

"Not till Pedro told me."

"What do you know about it, Gaspar?"

This man could not speak English, so he answered in Spanish to the effect that the dogs had been all right when he had shut them up on the previous night. He had not yet been to let them out and feed them, when Pedro told him they were dead and Veedor came to look at them. The dogs, he believed, had been poisoned.

Further questions were asked, but no satisfaction was obtained, and the keeper was allowed to go.

"If nobody has any objections," spoke up Billy, then, "I would like to look at those dogs before they are buried."

"Do so, by all means," granted Isidora. "Pompey will accompany you."

The boys and the darky set out.

"That lad looks like a keen one," observed Mr. Millwall, as he looked after them.

"And he is as keen as he looks, too," declared Pablo and Isidora, together. "He is a detective born, though of course he has always been in the city. He is from New York."

"Will you allow him to accompany me back home? He may be able to help me out in my search."

"I was about to suggest," responded Gallardo, "that I and the boys go back with you. We may, all together, be able to discover some clew to the missing ones."

"Yes, go," urged Isidora. "Take a number of men with you, too, and make every effort to learn where the girls are, and rescue them. I will come over later in the cart."

So it was arranged, and in a little time they set out, Billy and Skinny on horseback for almost the first time in their lives. But they had Mexican saddles, and with a few general directions from Gallardo, made out fairly well.

CHAPTER III.

POMPEY DAYLIGHT'S STARTLER.

CALEB MILLWALL was one of the substantial men of the county.

He owned a big estate, was rich besides, and was much liked by everybody.

His farm touched the San Joaquin River, and was one of the finest in that section. It was not second to the Cantatriz estate.

Besides his California farm, he owned a big cattle ranch in Texas, and this was managed by his only son, Paul Millwall, a young man of thirty-two.

The two nieces whose names have been mentioned were Erica Willison and Alma Raleigh. They were like sisters to each other, but in fact were not related at all.

Erica was a daughter of Mrs. Millwall's sister, while Alma was a daughter of Mr. Millwall's sister. They were not even cousins to each other, but called themselves such, out of fond friendship. Their mothers having died when they were quite young, they had been brought up and educated by Mr. Millwall.

Alma was the elder of the two. She was twenty, dark, pretty, and winsome. She was rather small, but perfectly and gracefully formed. Erica was nineteen, fair, golden-haired, and handsome. She was taller than Alma but slender, yet perfectly rounded. Both were educated and refined, both had loving and gentle dispositions, and both were engaged in marriage to estimable young men.

The elder was engaged to a Harry Strykers, a young American of thirty, who was employed as superintendent on the farm of Diego Macareno, which has been mentioned as lying between the Millwall and Cantatriz estates.

Erica was engaged to Paul Millwall, and their wedding was set for the coming week. On this day Paul was expected home, and great preparations were in progress for the coming event.

As is usually the case, there were rivals for the hands of these two pretty girls.

Harry Strykers had a rival in the person of one Lazarus Rockstone. He was a man of fifty, a miserly fellow, who held a mortgage on an estate that belonged to Alma Raleigh. On the strength of that mortgage he was trying to win her hand. But he was utterly despised, and his offer was laughed at.

And Mr. Rockstone's hold upon her was none too good. He dared not foreclose, because he knew that the money would be forthcoming immediately from Mr. Millwall, and as the property was bringing in far more than enough to bear up the interest, Alma had a little revenge upon him by simply paying that interest promptly; for it was at a far lower rate than he could have obtained for the money could he invest it elsewhere.

Paul Millwall's rival was Diego Macareno, the Spanish haciendado. He was about thirty-five, good-looking, and rich. He had proposed, but had been rejected. He had declared, however, that he would hope on.

And so the situation stood at the time of our story.

When the party set out from the Cantatriz farm mansion, to accompany Mr. Millwall home, it consisted of ten persons.

There were Mr. Millwall and Mr. Gallardo, Broadway Billy and Skinny, Patsey McGinty, and five of the farm employees. And they went forward at a good speed, one that caused Billy and Skinny to give all their attention to keeping their seats in the saddle.

"Hould fast, me b'yes," encouraged Patsey McGinty. "Sure, it is yerselves as will make bould riders, so ye will, whin wanst yez learn how."

"Say, Patsey," observed Billy, between jolts, "jest keep an eye upon my lean lieutenant, will ye? If we go much faster th' breeze will waft him out o' th' saddle, an' we'd have no end o' trouble in findin' him."

This raised a laugh, in which Mr. Millwall had to join.

"Which can't be said of you," Skinny retorted. "We'd find you by th' wag of your tongue."

"If we'd only thought," continued Billy, "we might 'a' put a little glue on th' saddle, an' then there would been no danger."

"And you'll need a good deal of glue on yours, to keep you there, if you don't be still and 'tend to what you're doin'," Skinny warned. "You'd fit a wheelbarrow better than you do a horse."

"And you'd fit a clothes line better," returned Billy. "But, do be careful, Skinny, and keep a good hold. Sorry I haven't a piece of thread to tie ye on with. You'd be a small loss, of course, but you've twined your slender self so about my 'fections that I'd weep salt, sad tears ter lose ye."

"Which wouldn't be any more'n I've done fer you," Skinny declared.

The party pressed onward, and were soon at the Macareno place, where they found several more mounted men awaiting them.

At the head of these was Senor Diego Macareno himself.

"*Cascaras!*" that individual exclaimed, "have you not brought the dogs?"

Millwall had stopped there on his way over, and had informed Macareno of what had taken place, asking if he had seen anything of the ladies. The Spaniard was now out to lend assistance in the search.

"No, the dogs are dead—have been killed," Mr. Millwall answered.

"*Carrambo!*" was the excited exclamation, "who can have killed them? How were they killed, Senor Gallardo?"

"By poison, we believe," Pablo answered.

"*Caspita!* What does it mean?"

"We think it has been done with an object. Some one has had a dread of those dogs, for some good reason. Whether it has anything to do with the missing ladies, we can't say."

"It looks strange, certainly. But let us hasten over."

They started forward, and the party of horse-men was now of good size.

Macareno took a place between Millwall and Gallardo, and the three talked over the matter as they rode.

When they arrived at the Millwall mansion, for it was little less than that, they quickly learned that the missing ones had not yet returned. Mrs. Millwall met them in tears, and urged them to find the girls without delay.

Some of Millwall's men, too, were now mounted, and there were about twenty all told. They were hastily directed what to do, and were sent out in couples in every direction.

Broadway Billy felt that he and Skinny were playing but a very insignificant part in all this; but the ex-gamin had his eyes open, and was attentive to everything that was said and done.

He noticed that Macareno was making more of a fuss than any one else.

"See here, my shadowy lieutenant," he observed to Skinny, "you kin bet that that Spanish dude is in love with one of th' lost gals. See how he takes on. It is a sure sign o' love on th' brain, when ye see a feller actin' like that."

"Well, I s'pose he's got a right to," Skinny drawled, in response.

"Mebby he has, I don't know anything about that; but with all his hustle an' bustle he makes me think that he is puttin' on."

This caused Skinny to look more closely.

"I'm sure I don't know," he said, after a moment. "Mebby he is, but what is there he could put on about? I guess it's no use fer you ter let th' fever git holt of ye, Billy, fer I don't believe ye will have a case here."

"Sweet pertaters! my gay an' festive skeleton!" Billy exclaimed, "but that is jest what has happened. Th' fever is on me now, and it is gnawin' at my vitals, as sure as sin."

"Then ye had better git rid of it in mighty short order, that's all I kin tell ye. There is no chance here fer detective work; you want th' city fer that."

"Don't you be too sure about that, my ghostly partner. We may strike a clew here that will add to our fame and fortune. That is what we are after, you know, and it won't do ter let any golden opportunities slip by. We'll keep mum, Skinny, dear, but if we git holt of a clew we'll jest git right up and hump ter git thar. We'll show what we're made of, and so keep ourselves solid in th' cornference of Inspector Br— But, hello! our friend Gallardo is callin' me."

The men had been sent off with a rush, in their various directions, and the three, Millwall, Gallardo, and Macareno, were talking together.

Gallardo had just called out to Billy to join them.

"A young man who is fast rising into fame as a detective, according to what Mr. Gallardo says about him. I mean to let him try his hand at this mystery. He has received the highest kind of honors and rewards for his services, so far."

Billy protested, and tried to pass it off, but Macareno looked at him keenly.

"So you are a detective, eh?" he mused, thoughtfully.

"Nary time," Billy denied. "If I have ever done anything in that line, it has been owin' to dumb luck. Detectives are supposed to have brain, and that is an article that I never possessed. My cocoanut is filled with milk and water, or something that is as strong as that."

"Nevertheless," said Mr. Millwall, "we will

see what you can do about this matter. Now, can't you suggest something?"

"Do you mean it?" asked Billy.

"Yes, I mean it. Go ahead and play detective, whether you are one or not. I know that badge Mr. Gallardo tells about was not given to you for nothing."

"Well, sir, if you want me to bend my weak mind and limited understanding to th' task, s'pose we go and take a look at th' room where th' ladies slept."

"Not by any means a bad suggestion," declared Mr. Millwall. "Come right along, all of you."

Just then Harry Strykers rode into the yard and sprung from his horse.

"Is this true, that the young ladies are missing?" he cried.

He was told that it was; and Macareno demanded to know why he had left the place without permission.

"I couldn't well get permission in your absence, sir," Harry returned, "and in a case like this I do not know that I would ask it. Miss Raleigh is my promised wife!"

Macareno's face grew darker than ever, but he did not venture to carry the argument further.

Mr. Millwall led the way into the house, and to a handsomely furnished bedroom on the second floor.

"This is the room," he announced.

They all looked around with interest, and Billy presently asked:

"Was this room found open this morning, sir?"

"Yes, just as you see it," was the assurance.

"Any of the lower doors open, to show which way the ladies had gone out?"

In the excitement that had prevailed, these items had not been thought of, but now a rigid investigation was begun. It turned out that one door, a rear hall door, had been found open by one of the servants who had got up early.

Broadway Billy had in the mean time searched thoroughly around the room, but discovered nothing.

Now he made it a point to ask Mrs. Millwall to search and ascertain how the ladies had been dressed. This she could tell, knowing the extent of their wardrobes.

It turned out that they had gone in simply their evening house-gowns, without even a hat or wrap. And this only added to the mystery. Where could they have gone? Or if they had been taken forcibly, by whom?

They had just left the room and descended to the piazza again, when a horseman was seen approaching at hot speed. When he drew near it proved to be Pompey Daylight, and as soon as he stopped in the yard he cried out:

"Massa Pedro! Massa Pedro! De debil an' his band hab done come an' tote off Missy Isidora! Come home quick!"

CHAPTER IV.

BILLY AND SKINNY ON DECK.

GREAT consternation immediately prevailed. Pablo Gallardo turned pale as death for a moment.

He quickly rallied, however, and demanded a fuller explanation.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "What has happened? Who has carried off my wife? Come, tell us all about it, and in few words?"

"Hit am jest what I hab tol' yo', sah," the darky declared. "De lady was 'bout ready ter come ober heah, an' I was ter drive her ober in de cart, when masked men done swoop down inter de yard an' gobble her up an' off dey went down toward de river."

"And why didn't you start after them? Why didn't you get the men together and pursue them immediately?"

"Cause we done found de stables locked, an' had ter bu'-t 'em open ter git hosses. I hab set men after 'em, while I kem ober here as fast as eber I could."

"What is the meaning of all this?" cried Mr. Millwall. "What is going on in our midst? Are we at the mercy of a band of outlaws? If so, we will give them a taste of the old-time vigilance, or my name is not what it is!"

"What is to be done?" demanded Macareno. "We must rescue Dona Gallardo, at all hazards. Perhaps your two nieces have been carried off by the same band, Senor Millwall."

"I do not doubt it," Mr. Millwall agreed.

"But, come, we must not be idle; Gallardo is already in the saddle, and we must accompany him. We have done all we can do here for the present, and this may be just the trail we want to strike, anyhow."

"Yes, you are right; come on."

With a hasty word of leave, Pablo was already off, Pompey Daylight with him, and now Millwall, Macareno, McGinty, and two or three others were after them in hot haste.

Broadway Billy and Skinny were overlooked and perhaps forgotten, in the face of the new excitement and danger.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, as he looked at his thin partner, "it begins ter look as if we're counted out in this inning, don't it? And that's jest as much your fault as it is mine, too."

"How d'ye make that out?" Skinny asked.

"How are we ter blame fer it?"

"Well, ye see they couldn't observe you, anyhow, in their hurry, you're so thin; and me they don't want, 'cause I've got no brain in my wooden head. See?"

"Oh! git out! They didn't mean nothin' by it. See th' trouble they're in, and ye can't wonder that they haven't any time ter monkey with us. We could never ride with 'em at that rate, anyhow."

"It wouldn't be so bad," Billy continued to fault-find, "but two of the lazy fellows here jumped into our saddles and carried off our horses atween their legs; that is what I don't like about it. We've got ter hoof it back, or stay here. Begin ter feel jest how small I am, out here where a horse is part of a man, and I wonder that I ever got th' least notice from Inspector Br— Hello! there is th' lady callin' us!"

Mrs. Millwall was calling to them from the piazza.

They went forward, having wandered about half-way from the piazza to the end of the drive that led out of the big yard.

"I see they have left you behind," the lady said, when they came up. "Won't you come into the house?"

"Getting left seems to be one of my accomplishments," responded Billy. "Much obliged to you, but I guess we had better trudge back to Mr. Gallardo's. If you have no objections, though, I'll look around here a little further before we start."

"You are heartily welcome to look as much as you like. I only hope you will discover something that will betray the one who has taken my pets away."

"That is what I'd like to do, ma'm, but it don't promise very big for success at th' present outlook."

Billy turned away with a bow, and he and Skinny passed around to the rear of the house.

"Skinny," Billy remarked, "I never felt so small in my life. I feel almost as small as you are. We must do somethin' ter redeem ourselves in the eyes of our friends here, or our stock will be away below par. What are we goin' ter do?"

"I give it up, Billy. But I can't see anything th' matter. We were in high clover till this rumpus kicked up, and as soon as it's over we'll be treated all right again."

"Jest so, and mebbey you're right; but I don't feel easy at takin' a back seat like this. Wish I could ride like the rest of 'em kin, and you bet I wouldn't be here a-mopin' 'round like a sick chicken!"

"Well, where are ye goin'?"

They had reached the fence in the rear of the house, and were at a gate that led into a spacious garden.

"Don't know much about it myself," Billy owned.

They stopped and looked at the house. Billy had had just this in mind. He wanted to calculate the chances of the girls' having been taken from the window.

Having fixed upon the window of their room, however, he immediately decided that all the chances were against it. It was a good distance from the ground, and he did not see any ladder around.

A sudden exclamation from Skinny called his attention.

"What is it, frail one?" he asked.

"Look here!"

Skinny pointed to the side of the gate. There, on a sharp point of a broken nail was a fragment of thin cloth.

Billy quickly plucked it off and looked at it. "Sweet pertaters!" he ejaculated, "if this ain't torn from a woman's dress you kin kick me softly behind. I'll show it to Mrs. Millwall, and see if she knows anything about it."

With that, Billy started around to the front, where he had left the lady, and finding her on the piazza still, approached her and asked:

"Can you tell me who wears a dress like this, Mrs. Millwall?"

The lady gave one glance at the piece, and exclaimed:

"Why, that is from Alma's dress!"
 "The one she had on last night?"
 "Yes."
 "Then this is one little clew, anyhow."
 "Why, where did you find it?"
 "On a sharp nail at the side of the garden gate back there. I think they went through that way. Just excuse me, and I'll go and look further."

Billy was off again, and soon joined his meager partner at the garden gate, where Skinny was looking around for further clews.

"Found anything further?" Billy inquired.

"No, nothin' more."

"Well, come, let's go down through th' garden, and mebbe we'll strike somethin' more that will interest us. I'd like ter git my grip onto this mystery, and that is prime truth. Rip my mizzen-spanker and carry away my flying-jib if it wouldn't be jest boss fer you and me ter unravel this matter and bring th' rascals up with a round turn!"

"But, we don't know that there's any rascals in it, yet," Skinny reminded. "Mebby th' girls have jest simply sloped off with their lovers, as girls sometimes will."

"You may be right, my poor an' hungry-lookin' lieutenant, but I'm goin' ter cast my vote th' other way. That torn dress looks ter me like haste and rough usage; I don't know how it hits you."

"It's jest as likely ter have been a simple accident."

They were proceeding down the walk that led through the big garden, at the end of which was seen another gate that opened into a fruit orchard.

The lads kept their eyes well about them all the way, but discovered nothing. When they came to the rear gate, however, they found it unfastened, and on the other side of it, where the ground was softer, several tracks were seen, and there was the appearance of a recent slight scuffle.

"Hello! this looks like business!" cried Billy. "Somethin' has been goin' on here, 'Tbinny, and that you kin jest bet on. We'll foller this trail, if we kin do it, and see where it leads to. Sweet pertaters! but I'd jest give ten per-cent of all my boodle, if we could find and rescue th' gals, and that's th' polished fack! It would jaise put us solid with th' folks here, an' would raise us another notch in the cornference of Inspector Br— Hello! here's somethin'!"

As he uttered the exclamation, Billy sprang forward and picked something up from the ground.

It was a piece of gold braid, such as frequently adorns the hats of Mexicans and Spaniards. It was about a foot in length, and at one end was a gold button. There was thread in it, showing that it had been attached to some article of dress.

"What is it?" demanded Skinny, eagerly.

"It looks like a part of th' make-up of a Spanish dude," Billy responded. "I guess he's lost some of his fancy head-gear. You know they're all death on fancy hats, my emaciated partner."

"Look out you don't dislocate yer jaw over sich words, Billy. You'll git one of them whoppers fast in yer throat some of these days, and that'll be th' last of ye."

"Emaciated, you mean? I'd never git choked with sich a thin word as that, Skinny. But, see here, this ain't attendin' ter business. Let's foller these tracks, if we kin, and see where they lead to."

"Lead right along, and you'll find me not far behind."

There was no hard walk through the orchard, like that through the garden, and the tracks, which were rather heavy, could be followed.

Down through the orchard they led, in a diagonal course from the garden gate toward some trees and brush in the distance.

"If I don't mistake," mused Billy, "that is th' river down there."

"Then have they committed susan-cide?" suggested Skinny.

"More likely they have been taken off in a boat."

"We'll soon see about that."

"Mebby we will. I don't much reckon th' rascals have left very plain marks behind 'em, if they could help it."

Pressing on, they were soon at the border of trees, underbrush and tule that fringed the river, and found that a broad opening led down to a boat-landing.

Billy was about to speak, when he caught the sound of voices, and held up a finger as a warning to Skinny to be silent. The voices came from the direction of the river.

Skinny was just a little behind, and when he came up, Billy whispered:

"Hold your hush, my gay an' festive shadder, fer I hear voices ahead. Don't know whose they are yet, but we'll see. Mebby we'll git onto somethin' that will be of use to us in this game."

"All right," Skinny whispered back, "I'll move like a ghost."

"Which you allus do," retorted Billy.

They went forward softly, until through the tall tule they had a view of the boat-landing, upon the narrow planking of which two men were seated, engaged in conversation. The lads stopped then to try to overhear what they were saying.

CHAPTER V.

A POINT OR TWO GAINED.

THE men were in plain sight, while the tall, thick tule hid the lads from their view."

One was a young man, about twenty-five, good-looking, but with a certain air of recklessness and dissipation that did not mark him favorably. He was clad in rather a free-and-easy style, and looked like a typical cowboy.

The other was older. He had a beard, and looked to be forty. He was evidently an American, as was the younger, too; was browned and hardened, and apparently much used to sun and storm. He was roughly dressed, and looked like a rough-and-ready miner who might have wandered down from the northern end of the State.

At their feet, rubbing idly against the little landing was a small boat, with oars in the locks, showing the way the men had come there.

"Then you will risk it to-night, eh?" the older man was saying.

"Yes, if I think it can be done," was the response from the younger. "I will go to the house and take in the lay of the land, and will meet you here at midnight."

"Good enough. I will be on hand. Once that paper is in your hands, then you will be well fixed, and I—"

"And so will you, too. You help me to get and swear yourself as my witness, and we'll share the result in a fair way."

"I'm satisfied with that. Th' property ought ter be yours anyhow. What right has old Millwall ter hold fast till th' gal is twenty-one? Once you git it, you kin let her suck her fingers fer her share, as she'd order do."

"And you bet she will, too! Old Millwall didn't turn me out fer nothin', and he'll find it out so. You jest be my witness, and we'll balk him, sure as water runs and grass grows."

"And you kin 'pend on me fer that, every time."

"Well, don't forget; to-night at twelve, at this place."

"I'll be here, sure."

They arose, and Billy and Skinny knew that the younger man would soon pass through the opening in which they were hiding, and that if they desired to avoid discovery, they must move without delay.

Billy gave Skinny's sleeve a gentle jerk, and stepped quickly but silently back toward the higher ground, and as soon as he was out of the opening, turned to the right and ran lightly down along the brush for a little distance, when he found a nook that just suited his purpose.

Skinny was right at his heels, and they were again hid from view.

In a few moments they heard the sound of oars, and a little later the younger of the two men came up and made his way off into the orchard in the direction of the house.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, as soon as the man was beyond bearing, "but we are in fer it, Skinny, sure as ye're born. That feller don't mean no good, and it is fer us ter baffle his little skeem. And we'll do it, too, if it's in th' wood. What did ye make out of it all?"

"It seems he's goin' ter try on a little robbery ter night, with th' help of that other feller."

"That's it. They want ter git some paper that will put a trump card inter their hand. And one of th' lost girls is concerned in it, too, and they want ter cheat her out of some boodle or property. Oh! I tell ye what it is, Skinny, my scant-weight lieutenant, we have got ter put our stick inter this puddin', sure, and give it a stir that will prove what it's made of. What d'ye say?"

"Don't you think we've done about enough of pokin' our noses inter other people's business?"

"Why, bless ye, my attenuated shadder, it is our business ter poke our nose inter every bit of rascally work that crops out to our notice. We'll make it our business, anyhow."

"Yes, and you'll keep on till you git killed outright, and that'll wind you up fer good, that's what you'll do."

"I don't know, light one, I have been through some pretty narrow squeezes, and I'm on deck yet."

They had come out from their place of hiding, and were returning to the direction of the boat-landing.

When they came there the boat was out of sight around a bend in the river, and no one was to be seen.

They looked all around, but were unable to discover anything further of the trail that had brought them there. There were many tracks around, but that explained nothing.

"I guess we have come about to the end of our string in this direction," Billy observed.

"It looks that way," Skinny agreed. "No doubt th' ladies have taken a boat here, and it would puzzle th' prince of detectives ter foller a water trail."

"I believe there is logic in that, Skinny, and that's a fack. S'pose we amble back to th' house."

"Anything you say."

"Well, I say that. We'll see what sort of a reception that young man has received."

The point agreed upon, they returned, and were soon at the house.

Mrs. Millwall was on the piazza, where they had left her, and the young man was standing on the ground in front of her, with one foot on a step.

"Yes, it is a strange thing," the lady was saying. "We have not the slightest idea where they can be. Mr. Millwall's suspicion is directed to our overseer, Ricardo Tolego, however, as he is missing, too."

"I cannot think that of Ricardo!" the young man exclaimed. "He always seemed to me to be a very decent sort of fellow, for a Mexican. It does look strange, nevertheless, as you say."

Just then the man heard Billy and Skinny approaching, and turned to see who was coming.

He gave them a glance of inquiry, and Mrs. Millwall hastened to explain who they were.

"Did you find anything further?" she asked, of Billy.

"Nothing of big account," was the reply.

"He has been trying to find out something about the missing ones," the lady further explained, "and found that they were taken through the garden. He found a bit of Alma's dress on the gate-post."

"Is it possible? And could you trace them no further?" turning to Billy with the question.

"Yes, we found that they went down to that landing at the river," Billy declared, "but that was about as far as we could foller 'em."

The man looked at him keenly, but Billy returned the stare unflinchingly.

"Have you just come from there?" the man asked.

"Oh! we've been roamin' about through th' orchard," was the response. "Didn't you see us when you kem through? We was out there under th' trees."

The fellow looked relieved.

"No, I didn't see you," he said, and turned again to Mrs. Millwall.

"When will Mr. Millwall be back?" he asked.

"It is impossible to tell," was the reply. "He went off in haste to the rescue of Mrs. Galardo, as I told you, and no knowing where the chase will lead to."

"Well, can't you ask a fellow in?"

"No, Jacob Willison, I can not," the lady answered, flatly. "You know that my husband has forbid you the house. I am sorry for you, but it was your own fault that you were turned away."

"Well, I suppose I can't blame you, aunt, but it is a little rough. Anyhow, I'll wait around till he does come, and perhaps he won't be too hard on me."

"You are welcome to wait, but I do not believe he will listen to a word from you."

Just then a horseman came dashing up the road into the yard.

It was a Mexican, and at sight of him Mrs. Millwall cried:

"Why! here is Tolego, now!"

The man rode right up the walk to the piazza, and saluting, hurriedly inquired:

"Is it true, this that I hear about the ladies being missing?"

"It is only too true," answered the lady. "Where have you been, that you knew nothing about it till now?"

"I have been over to Goshen. I went over last night, and expected to get back by daylight, but was delayed. Which way has Senor Mill-

wall gone? I will take a fresh horse and join him in haste."

"Are you quite sure that you know nothing about the ladies?" Mrs. Millwall demanded.

"I—what—surely you cannot mean that seriously, Dona. What should I know about them?"

"Mr. Millwall suspects that you do."

"And all because I happened to be absent. I am sorry that it has come about so, but I tell you candidly that I know nothing about them. But, tell me which way, so I can be off."

"He set out with Senor Gallardo to the Cantatriz Farm. Isidora is reported as carried away by outlaws."

"*Cascaras!* I will be off at once."

He dashed out of the yard in the direction of the stables, and sprung out of the saddle.

"You cannot suspect him," observed Jacob Willison. "He is as innocent as I am. By the way, I will go with him! If Mr. Millwall sees that I am willing to help in the hunt, he may think a little better of me. I'll take a horse, if you will allow me to do so."

"Yes, take one, and may good luck attend you."

"Thank you; I hope it may."

The young man set out on a run to the stables, to get a horse, and Billy asked of the lady:

"May I ask who that fellow is, ma'am?"

"Certainly; he is my nephew, and a brother to the Miss Willison who is one of the missing girls."

"You don't seem to have a good opinion of him."

"I must own that I haven't. But, it is his own fault. He had a good home here with me and my husband, until— But, there, I need not tell you the particulars. My husband sent him away, and he has not been here in a long time until now."

"He is a bad egg, and that you can bet on," Billy declared. "Do you think he can have had any hand in the disappearance of the girls?"

"Oh! no, I cannot think that of him, wild as he is!" she exclaimed.

"Well," said Billy, "I guess me and my frail follower will amble back over to the Cantatriz place. We can't be of much use here."

"Will you not wait? Mr. Millwall will take you over, when he returns, and—"

"Oh! no, we'll be off, I guess."

With a few more words on both sides, the boys set out, and as soon as they were out of ear-shot, Billy exclaimed:

"Sweet pertaters! did ye cast yer eye at that feller's hat, Skinny? I mean th' Mexican feller that rode in on th' boss. Did ye see that some of the gold fringe is missin' from it? An' that fringe is jest like th' piece that I found. That is th' feller that has had a hand in th' takin' off o' them gals, and I'm bettin' nickels on it, too. We'll wax him, you see if we don't."

CHAPTER VI.

A HEROIC LITTLE WOMAN.

In the mean time exciting events were taking place elsewhere.

When the masked men had appeared in the yard, at the Cantatriz place, they made their stay there as brief as possible.

From the way they set to work, it would have been plain to a thoughtful observer that they had had their plans all arranged before coming.

They rode in a circle around Isidora Gallardo, who was about ready to set out for the Millwall place, as described by Pompey Daylight, and two of them snatching her up from the ground, they wheeled about and dashed off in the direction of the river.

For a moment Pompey had been too frightened to move. But he soon recovered, and calling for help, set about getting the horses out and giving chase. But the doors of the stable were found locked, and quite a delay was experienced in getting them open, and by that time the abductors had a long start.

Finally Pompey got men set off in pursuit, while he rode over to inform Gallardo, as shown.

Isidora was greatly frightened, and could not imagine what to make of the sudden attack. Who could be responsible for it? And what was the object?

These were among the first thoughts that flashed through her brain.

Looking around, she saw that the men were all carefully masked, so that she could not recognize any of them. She could tell by their dress, however, that most of them were Mexicans.

Down through the lane in the broad acres of wheat they rode, and the lady was prevented from screaming or asking questions by a hand that was held over her mouth.

When they had gone some distance from the house, she was allowed the use of her tongue,

and the first use she made of the liberty was to scream.

But that could do little good now.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded, fiercely, in Spanish.

A laugh answered her. It was plain enough that she had fallen into the hands of rough men, whoever they were.

"I demand to know!" she insisted, "and you shall answer me. Who are you, and what is the meaning of this outrage?"

"You are an outlaw's prize, and that is all you need know for the present," her captor responded.

"And you intend to hold me for ransom?"

"That is about it, pretty lady; and if the ransom isn't paid in haste, then we may conclude to keep you instead."

"The ransom will be paid, of that you may be sure," Isidora declared, quickly enough. "All that I can ask is that you will treat me with respect during the time that I am in your power."

Truth to tell, it was a relief to the lady to know that she had fallen into the hands of no worse enemies than brigands. If they intended simply to hold her for ransom, as they declared, they would not dare to harm her in any way; or at any rate they were not likely to do so.

They were soon at the river, and at a place where the river was easily fordable. In they plunged, and were soon on the other side.

Once over the river, they left a trail that turned northward, finally merging into a road, and rode away to the south, toward Tulare Lake.

By this time, as they mounted a little higher ground, they saw horsemen in pursuit of them.

For the present the pursuers had the advantage of a good footing, for the pursued were in a decidedly rough and uneven country; but the others would soon be on the same ground, and the terms would be equal.

The outlaws, for their doings proved them to be nothing less, pushed on with all the speed they could get out of their animals, and keeping as close to the river as the nature of the ground would permit.

It was clear that they had no desire to be seen, and less to be called to account.

And in this manner they kept on, until finally the shore of the lake was at hand, and they found a place where they could go down to the water.

There was a yacht, with sail partly raised and all ready to put out into the lake.

Isidora immediately recognized it as her own boat.

"What do you mean to do?" she demanded. "Are you going to take me across the lake, villains?"

"That is about the surest way to throw followers off the track," was the rough response of the man who held her, and he sprung from his horse with her in his arms.

Another of his men followed him, to help him with his burden to the yacht, and in a few moments Isidora was placed on board and the sail was thrown to the breeze.

No sooner was the yacht away than the horsemen turned and made off, and in a few minutes were separated, going in every direction.

Ten minutes later the pursuers reached the lake, only to realize the trick that had been played upon them.

Away out upon the broad sheet of water was the yacht, while the horsemen were not to be seen.

The men were without a leader, and after a brief confab among themselves they decided that all they could do was to return and report what had taken place. And that they proceeded to carry out.

But about this time the three men on the yacht were not having everything as they could wish, for their fair prisoner was showing them that she had no intention of resisting tamely, if she had a chance to do otherwise, and that chance had been allowed her.

She was, as they neither knew nor suspected, armed with a revolver.

There had been one man on the yacht, and the two who had gone aboard with the prisoner made up the three.

Being three against one, and that one a woman, they had no thought of tying her hands, but had placed her in a comfortable position in the body of the boat, telling her to sit still.

She obeyed while they were busy about getting under way, and sat as silent and demure as though afraid to move or speak.

But, that was far from the truth, for a hand in the pocket of her dress was firmly clutching the revolver.

Her mind was already made up as to what she would do, and she was biding her time to act.

When everything had been made ship-shape about the yacht, and there was nothing to be done but to steer the craft and attend to the sheet, then the three men took their places at the stern, one with the tiller in hand, and the other two seated on the windward side, one holding the end of the sheet.

The breeze was brisk, and the yacht bounded along almost like a bird on the wing, for the men proved that they were not mean sailors.

Still the lady waited. The horsemen had gone long since, but now another party could be seen in their places.

These the lady took, rightly, to be her friends, so this was the time to put her plan to the test.

Drawing the revolver from her pocket, she covered the men with it, and cried, in Spanish:

"Leave this boat, every one of you! Overboard, every one, and be quick or I shoot to kill! Over, I say!"

The rascals started up in greatest surprise. The man tending the sheet let it fall from his hands, and the sail peak dropped and flapped idly.

"*Cascaras!*" cried the leader of the three, what do you mean by this, little wild-cat? *Ce! alma mia*, put up that weapon up, or it will be the worse for you. Hand it to me!"

He took a step forward, but the revolver came up flush with his face, and the determined little lady cried:

"Come one step nearer, and you die, dog that you are!"

The fellow prudently hung back.

For the moment the young woman held the advantage, but would she hold it and win? That was to be seen.

"Did you hear me?" she demanded, fiercely. "Overboard, I say, every one of you! I will give you ten seconds to decide."

"Curse you!" cried her captor, "you will regret this, little fool! Throw down that weapon, or we will kill you!"

"If you count your lives worth saving, jump!"

The retort was given with bold calmness, and the flashing black eyes that looked over the threatening revolver never flinched.

At this moment the man at the tiller reached for a weapon, when, quick as a wink, the little revolver spoke, and clutching at his breast, the fellow reeled and fell headlong over the stern into the water.

"*Quita de ahí!*" cried the lady to the others. "Over with you, or you will be served the same!"

There was a pause of a moment, and then the other fellow—the one who had held the sheet, dived over and struck out for the shore.

Isidora saw that the victory was nearly hers.

"Quick!" she cried, "say which you will have! If I shoot you will never live to tell of this day's work."

"*Carrambo!*" the rascal grated, "but you shall pay for this! I will have your life! I will teach you that—"

"*Silencio!*" the brave little woman interrupted. "I will count three, and if you are not out of the boat then you will fall out a dead man. I never miss my mark. *Un! Dos!—*"

It was not necessary for her to add "*tres!*" for with a bitter oath the fellow turned and sprang overboard, and she was left alone in control of the yacht, free.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, and thrusting the weapon back into her pocket, she sprung to the helm.

But the danger was not quite over, for just then the report of a pistol was heard, and a bullet whistled past her head.

She looked in the direction of the report, and there was one of her enemies, just a little distance off, preparing to shoot again.

Quickly she dropped down, and that bullet, too, went harmlessly over, and then she tried a shot herself.

As she fired, however, the head disappeared under the water, and when it came up again it was some distance further off. She fired again, then sending a bullet skipping by far too near to be pleasant, and the man struck out for the shore without any further delay.

"But, what of the other?" She looked around to see him, but could not discover him anywhere. Just then, though, a slight shock revealed the truth that he had caught hold upon the boat, and in the same moment she saw his eyes peer over the bow.

She fired, and the face disappeared, and was not seen again.

Watching for some time for him to appear, and finding that he did not, she finally drew in

the sheet, filled the sail, turned the yacht about and headed for the north end of the lake.

When she had got under way, she looked to the point where she had seen the horsemen, but they were gone.

"They have given me up for lost," she mused. "I will give them a surprise when I reach home. I hope they have not needlessly alarmed Pablo!"

CHAPTER VII.

FORCED IDLENESS HARD TO BEAR.

PABLO GALLARDO, meanwhile, and his friends and the men with them, had come from the Millwall place in all haste.

Every horse was put to his best speed, and the result was that when they arrived at the Cantatriz place they were strung out to all distances apart.

The foremost of all was Pablo, and after him came Mr. Millwall and Macareno.

When Pablo reached the yard, he stopped to inquire further about the matter, and while he was there the rest of the party came up.

"They have gone to the river," Pablo quickly informed. "Vamos! We must rescue my bride, or I shall go mad!"

Away they dashed again, tearing down through the lane in the wheat like a whirlwind, and were soon at the river.

There they met the other pursuers coming back, and questions and answers flew thick and fast for a few moments.

"She is lost! She is lost!" the unhappy young husband cried. "If they have taken her across the lake we can never find her."

"Don't give up like that," encouraged Mr. Millwall. "Let us turn back and go to the lake on this side. We can pursue them in the lady's own yacht."

"Yes, yes! We will do that. I had not thought of it. Come, let us make all possible haste."

Turning quickly, Pablo was already off.

After him went the others, and once more passing through the yard, they were soon out upon the road, where they could make good speed.

"B'gobs!" muttered McGinty to Pompey Daylight, "but the young master is the devil on a horse! Oi wouldn't want ter foller him all day at this rate, no more Oi would, an' Oi'm tellin' ye."

"Hit am enough ter make him ride fast," declared Pompey. "I only hope young missy will be rescued afore harm comes to her."

"Oh! so do Oi! Gid-dap! ye loafin' divil!" to his horse. "D'ye want McGinty ter bring up de ind av dhe procession, sure!"

They pushed on, man after master, and finally they came to the lake, after a long, hard ride of several miles.

And there a welcome surprise awaited them.

Close in to the shore lay the little yacht, and Isidora was just furling the sail and making ready to come ashore.

She looked up, as the horsemen approached, and seeing who they were, waved her hand, and they all broke out in a wild cheer.

Pablo dismounted immediately and helped her ashore, when they embraced, as was but natural under the circumstances, and the next twenty minutes was spent in rapid conversation.

Finally they mounted and set out upon their return to the farm, riding now at a more moderate speed.

"It was a narrow escape for you, my child," remarked Mr. Millwall, "but you made the most of the slight advantage you had, and are a real heroine."

"I only wish that I could have learned more about the rascals," Isidora said, regretfully.

"I wish you could, too, but that is hardly to be thought of, compared with the good luck of your fortunate escape. I hope you killed the rascals, every one of them!"

"Oh! do not speak of that!" the lady exclaimed, with a shudder. "I do not see how I ever had the courage to shoot at all! I certainly would not have again."

"Yes you would, Dona," declared Senor Macareno.

And so they all agreed, and the talk ran on.

"Oh!" Isidora suddenly exclaimed, after awhile, "where are those two lads? I declare I had forgotten them."

"Are they not with us?" cried Pablo, looking around in much surprise.

"No; we left them at my place," answered Mr. Millwall. "They will be all right, there."

"In my anxiety and all the excitement, I did not once think of them," Pablo confessed, with something of regret in the tone.

"No matter," averred Mr. Millwall, "they

will be found all safe and sound at my place, and I will send them over with some of my men."

"Don't speak of that," cried Isidora, "for we are going right home with you. We do not forget that your nieces have not been found."

"Indeed, no!" echoed Pablo. "Let us get up a little more speed, too."

So they did, and in due time were again at the Millwall place.

Nothing had been seen of Billy and Skinny on the way.

Where could they be?

Neither had seen aught of Ricardo Tolego and Jacob Willison.

When they rode into the yard and up to the piazza of the farm mansion, they found there two persons, besides Mrs. Millwall, awaiting them.

One was Paul Millwall, who had just come over from Goshen, where he arrived by the morning train from the south.

He was a tall handsome young man, and one of commanding appearance. His skin was fair and clear, his eyes a deep blue, his long, light hair rested upon his shoulders, and a handsome moustache and imperial added dignity to his looks. He was clad in a semi-border outfit, and wore a wide-brimmed white felt hat.

The other was Lazarus Rockstone, whose name has been mentioned before in these pages.

He was a thin, stoop-shouldered man, with a ragged beard, and hands that had more the appearance of claws. His eyes were small, red and watery, but burned with a keen, avaricious fire.

The greeting between father and son was hearty and warm, and others followed all around, but it might have been noticed that that between Paul Millwall and Diego Macareno was cool, almost as cool as that of Mr. Millwall and Lazarus Rockstone.

In the kingly presence of Paul, the Spaniard dwarfed to nothingness, and it was little wonder that Erica had made her choice as she had.

"Where are the lads?" Mr. Millwall asked of his wife.

"Why, did you not meet them?" was the counter-question; "they set out to walk over to the Cantatriz place."

"No, we have not seen them; why did you let them start on foot?"

"They would not wait."

"How long since they started?"

"Not a very great while; they ought to have met you on the road."

"It is hardly possible that they could get lost," observed Gallardo. "You, Patsey, and Pompey, go right back and see if they are there, and if not, find them."

"We'll do that same, sor," McGinty responded, and he and the darky set out.

"I do not feel at all anxious about them," said Mr. Millwall, "for that Billy is well able to take care of himself. We don't want any more lost ones to hunt for at present, though."

"Oh! little fear that they are lost," agreed Isidora.

"Never mind about two worthless boys," broke in Lazarus Rockstone, in something of a chronic drawl, "but do something about finding the precious ladies. What shall I do if Alma Raleigh is never found! Oh! you must find her gentlemen; you must find her!"

"Little good it will do you, if she is found," snapped Harry Strykers. "You have no interest in that direction, old man."

"Haven't I? Haven't I, though?" the old fellow drawled; "we'll see about it. Don't I hold a mortgage on her property? And sha'n't she marry me? Oh! I have my plans all laid out in that direction, boasting youth. I repeat it, I proclaim it aloud, she must be found!"

Harry was in conversation with Paul, so paid no further attention to the old fellow, who still went on muttering to himself.

"Who are these boys they are talking about?" Paul was asking.

"Two lads who came down with Pablo and Isidora from San Francisco," explained Harry. "I don't know much about them, but I understand that the older one, or at any rate the larger one, Billy, is the hero of a hundred detective adventures."

"He must be a bright fellow, then."

"And he is, you bet! But, what is going to be done about this mysterious disappearance, Paul?"

"Why, I don't know what can be done, Harry. As there is no trail to follow, we are helpless. According to the story Isidora Cantatriz told me, Mrs. Gallardo—tells about her adventure, she was to be held for ransom, and I think it very probable that the other girls are in the

hands of the same band, whoever they are. If so, we shall soon hear from the leader, no doubt."

"Yes, but this uncertainty; it is killing! We don't know what danger they may be in, even at this moment!"

"True enough; but, as I said, we are helpless."

Harry groaned, and Paul's face was pale, and the latter's lips were hard set to keep back the emotion he felt.

Mrs. Millwall was just explaining the discoveries Billy had made, so far as she knew them, and all were listening eagerly.

"So they were taken through the garden and the orchard, and away by the river, eh?" reflected Mr. Millwall. "I do not know what to make of that."

"Why, in what way does it puzzle you?" asked Macareno.

"Where can they have been taken to, that way?"

"Why not as well that way as any other, if the brigands have indeed got them? Perhaps they could not have found a better way."

Mr. Millwall was thoughtful.

"The great question of the moment," broke in Paul, "is—what is going to be done about it?"

"About all we can do now," responded his father, "is to wait for our men to come in, and see what reports they will bring."

"Men have been sent out then?"

"Yes, in every direction."

"Oh! why do they not come in?" whined old Rockstone. "My heart is in despair about my poor dear Alma."

"Dry up! you sniveling old idiot!" cried Harry, in disgust.

"And, by the way," Mrs. Millwall remarked to her husband, "Jacob Willison has been here."

"What?" Mr. Millwall cried, "Jacob Willison has been here?"

"Yes; did you not see him? And, oh! as I forgot to tell you, in all the excitement, Tolego has been here, too."

"Tolego!"

"Yes; and—"

"Where has the dog been?"

"He says he went over to Goshen last night, and intended to get back before daylight, but got detained. He and Jacob set out together to go after you and help in the search."

"And he declares he knows nothing about the girls?"

"Nothing whatever. He seemed greatly surprised, and set off in all haste to assist you. And Jacob went with him, as I said."

All were listening. These remarks were followed by others, but nothing was said to throw light on the matter. And nothing could be done. An hour soon passed, and no new developments appeared. At the end of that time Ricardo Tolego and Jacob Willison rode into the yard.

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY AND PARD IN TROUBLE.

LET us return to Billy and Skinny.

They had not proceeded far on their way back to the Cantatriz place when they were overtaken by Ricardo Tolego and Jacob Willison.

These men dashed by them on the run, giving nothing more than a look at the two lads, who got out of the road to give them plenty of room.

"Birds of a feather, and you kin bet on it," muttered Billy, when they had passed. I feel it in my bones, Skinny, dear, that we are gon' ter hook horns with those fellers in th' near future. I'll bet if ye tossed up a cent ter see which one of 'em is th' greatest rascal, th' penny would stand on its edge when it kem down. What we want ter do is ter baffle their little game, whatever it is, and bring 'em up with a round turn."

"What we want ter do," Skinny disagreed, "is ter leave 'em alone. If we kin help get th' lost girls back, that's all right, but I've no desire ter fool around any of these Mexican villains. They are too handy with th' knife ter suit my ideas of th' fitness of things."

"Keep yer eye peeled fer 'em, then, and at th' first signs o' any monkey biz in th' knife line, jest try yer dissolver—I mean yer revolver—on 'em. Lead is one o' the best anky-dokes fer cold steel that you ever heard of, provided th' you get th' lead there first."

"Yes, if I could hit my man. Don't reckon I could hit th' broad side of a barn. I'd be 'most afraid ter shoot, anyhow."

"Oh! git out! See here, my lean lieutenant, if you git inter a diffikilty of any kind, and I ain't there ter back ye up, you jest out with yer

pistol and talk as big as th' biggest. Th' sight of a pistol, with a good strong threat behind it, will take th' starch out of most any of 'em. Just tell 'em that you'll be everlastingly jiggered and juggled, or words to that effect, if you won't punctuate 'em as full of holes as a porous plaster, and you bet they'll wilt. If they don't, then begin ter poke 'em as fast as ye kin."

"Oh! it's all well enough fer you ter talk, Billy, but when ye are in a hole it is different. Mehby you wouldn't be so brave. I don't believe you'd dare ter shoot a man—"

"Wouldn't I, though? You seem ter forget Sharkey Dan, don't ye? Didn't I warn him that if he didn't stop, on one 'casion, that I'd make a hole in him through which th' night winds would sigh a mournful dirge? And when he didn't stop, didn't I proceed ter fill up th' prescription? Bet yer life they won't monkey long with me, my gay an' festive youth, when it is their life or mine. I would soon lose th' confidence of Inspector Br— Hello! d'ye twig that, my slender sapling?"

"Do I twig what?"

"Cast yer eye along th' road, and you'll see that Tollygo and his partner are out of sight."

"So they are!" Skinny cried. "Where did they go to?"

"They wheeled inter th' Macareno place."

"Is that so?"

"Of course it's so! Don't make me swear to it. In they went, as slick as ye please; and now th' question is: What are they doin' there? They set out ter foller Mr. Millwall and th' rest of 'em."

"It looks a little queer."

"I should say it does. I haven't any too good opinion of that Dago Macaroni, or whatever his name is, and nothin' would surprise me. I'm goin' ter spy about his 'stablishment a little, my tender tulip."

"You'd better not do anything of th' sort. You'd better go right on to th' other place, and stay there. What would I do, if you got killed away out here so far away from home, and no one—"

"Now, Skinny, look here. You just roll that wet blanket of yours up and put it out of sight. You allus want ter throw it over at me th' very time when you know th' fever is ragin' and it would be sure death. I'm goin' ter do what I said, and if you don't want ter go with me, trudge right along."

Skinny felt a little hurt, but he could not leave his partner.

"Well, if you are bent on going, of course I'll stick to ye," he declared, "but it ain't 'cause I think it's actin' accordin' ter wisdom and boss sense."

"Come right on, then, and no more crogkin'."

By this time they were at the Macareno place, and Billy turned aside from the road and entered the tall wheat that grew on that side on which the house and other buildings were situated.

Going through this, instead of entering by the lane, they would come out in the rear of the house.

They were on the right of the lane, and not far distant from it.

"Don't git lost here, Skinny, whatever you do," Billy cautioned. "You are so awful slender that we'd never find ye. Jest part th' wheat so, and then step careful, and nobody could tell where we've come through. But, pshaw! there's no use tellin' you that, fer you might roam around here a month and you wouldn't break a stalk."

"Oh! shut up, will you?" Skinny growled. "Anybody'd think, ter hear you talk, that I am the shadder of a shadder fer a fack."

"Sweet pertaters! What else are ye? Take care, partner, and don't get hit by any of th' stalks when they spring back; it would be fatal to ye, sure."

"You'd better keep still, if ye don't want ter be discovered."

"That's so, Skinny, and mum is th' word. It beats all what a talker you are gettin' ter be. I can't keep ye still nohow. Now, not another word under penalty of losin' your office of lieutenant. Don't even think. Keep perfectly still."

As they were now coming near to the house, it was necessary for them to observe silence.

If they desired to avoid discovery, and naturally they did, they must use all caution. So, having had his little fling at his meager partner, Billy became as quiet as Skinny could desire.

When they came near the edge of the grain, which here was close to the rear of the house, they saw Tolego and Willison at the end of the house talking to a third man.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, in just a whisper, "if that ain't th' feller that was talkin'

to young Willison at th' boat-landin', then you kick me."

"That's who it is," Skinny agreed, "and he's as big as life."

"Somethin' that I can't understand," muttered Billy. "What is he doin' here? Jake parted with him as though they wasn't ter meet again till midnight. But I guess I see how it is. They didn't know th' girls was missin' then."

"That's th' way of it."

"But don't it begin ter look a little scaly fer Dago Macaroni, my gay an' festive youth? Seems ter me that he has got a finger inter this pie somewhere, but I don't jest see what finger it is yet, nor what part of th' pie it's in."

Stationed where they were, the two boys could not overhear anything that was being said among the three men, but could tell by their manner that they were talking earnestly.

Billy wanted to hear as well as see. He was not satisfied to take notes at long range, as he said to Skinny. He wanted some of the meat of the pudding as well as the crust.

He looked about to see how it was to be accomplished.

At that end of the house was the garden. The fence divided the garden from the yard, and there was a space of fifty feet or so between the fence and the house.

The men were nearer to the house than to the fence.

It was rather a dubious outlook for Billy, so far as his getting near enough to hear was concerned, but he did not yet give up.

He noticed that a hedgerow ran around from the front of the house to the gate that entered the garden. If he could get into the garden, and then through the gate and over the hedge without being seen, he might possibly be able to creep along until he came within ear-shot of the men.

He mentioned the plan to Skinny, but the thin partner objected to it at once. It was too much of a risk, he declared, and discovery was sure to follow.

Billy's argument was that nothing ventured meant nothing gained, and he resolved that he would try it.

"You wait right here, Skinny," he directed, "and keep your eye on me. If I do git nabbed, don't you show your head, but get help ter get me out of th' diffikilty. I don't know that I will get nabbed, but we'll jest s'pose th' case that way."

"Th' best way ter git out of th' diffikilty, is ter keep out of it," warned the lean lieutenant.

"There, now, Skinny, no more wet blanket at present. I'm off."

And so he was.

Leaving Skinny, Billy crept carefully through the wheat toward the fence that inclosed the garden, and had soon reached it. Then the next thing to be done was to climb over.

But that he did not have to do. He discovered that one of the pickets was loose, and pulling it aside, had a space through which he was able to squeeze at a pinch.

Once in the garden, he could cross over to the gate, amidst the bushes and flowers without much risk.

Reaching the gate, he found that fortune had favored him again, for the gate was unfastened and an inch or two open.

Opening it further, he lay flat down and crept out into the walk.

Now he had to be careful indeed, for discovery would be easy, here.

Two of the men, Tolego and Willison, were mounted, and commanded a good view all around. There was nothing but the low hedge to hide Billy from their eyes.

The men were just around a bend in the hedge, and Billy paused a moment to decide which side he should take in order to get near them. They were on the broad walk and either side would do.

Finally he took that side that was nearest the wheat, and pushing his way through at the end of the hedge where it joined the fence, crept carefully along.

Skinny could see him, plainly, and so might any one else who happened to look in that direction.

With great care Billy crept along, and at last was near enough to hear.

He wondered that he was not seen, for he could see the men plainly, and only the hedge, low and not over-thick, protected him.

But, as it turned out, all his trouble and risk availed him nothing, for the men were talking in Spanish.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy mentally exclaimed, "but this is a bad sell on me. Here I've had my labor for my pains, as th' poic said. This is

what comes of not knowin' everythin'. Now if I could only understand Spanish, I would be all right, and could perhaps learn somethin' of interest. A feller can't know too much, in these days of distress and tribbylation. I'll have ter study Spanish, I reckon, when I kin find time, or I'll drop in th' esteem of Inspector Br— Sweet pertaters! what's bu'sted now, I wonder!"

Billy's meditations were suddenly interrupted by a loud call from the house, in a woman's voice, in Spanish; and it was instantly followed by exclamations among the men, and one of them sprung over the hedge and made Billy a prisoner before he could think of resisting.

Looking toward the house, Billy saw a woman in one of the windows, and now she was pointing toward the wheat and saying something more.

Ricardo Tolego was off his horse in a moment, and springing over the hedge he made for the fence, cleared it at a bound, and was off into the wheat. In a few moments he was back again, and Skinny, too, was a prisoner.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PARTNERS IN A DILEMMA.

SKINNY looked daggers at Billy.

"I knowed how it would be," he growled.

"It's all your fault," Billy accused. "If you had kept your portly presence out o' sight, it wouldn't 'a' happened."

"Say," demanded Jake Willison, "what are you doin' here?"

"Lookin' fer bugs," answered Billy, in the most matter-of-fact way.

"Lookin' fer yer grandmother!" sneered Joel Meens, that being the name of the third man of the party; "you was playin' th' spy, that's what you was doin'."

"Say, do ye see anything about us that would incrate th' spy?" Billy asked. "Ain't we two of th' most innocent-lookin' fellers ye ever set eyes on? Besides, would we be likely ter venture here, right under yer noses, if we had anything ter spy about? I reckon not. We are after bugs, we are, and you don't know what a fondness we have fer 'em. Why, bugs is every-thing ter us. You'd orter see th' collection that we've got. It would—"

"There, now, that will do," interrupted Willison. "That story is too thin. I heard somethin' about your detective work, over at the house, and you think you can try some of it on here. But you'll find that you haven't got a lot of sleepy-head city duffers ter deal with; hey, Joel?"

"That's what's th' matter," agreed Meens.

"He is here ter play spy, and we must nip his game right in th' bud."

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, "ter hear you talk, a feller would think that there was a counterfeiter's den around here, or some other sich p'izen plague-spot of iniquity. What are ye afraid of, anyhow? Honest men don't have any fear of spies, that's a sure thing."

"Hush! Keep still!" warned Skinny. "You'll only get us inter worse trouble with that tongue of yours, Billy."

"Nary hush," Billy retorted. "These here fellers think they've got it all their own way, but they'll find out they ain't. If there ain't any law in this land of ours that will protect poor but honest bug-hunters, then it's time there was, that's all. Say, s'pose you take your hand off o' my neck and let me go."

This was addressed to Meens, who was holding him with no gentle grip.

"Not much," that worthy retorted. "You was playin' th' spy, and we know it. How long was you there?"

"Not more'n a minute, I reckon," was Billy's answer. "When I found you was here, talkin', I laid right still fer fear that I'd skeer yer hosses. I wouldn't do that fer anything, ye know."

"Oh! no, of course not!" sneered Willison.

"Say, do you understand Spanish?"

"Nary a word."

"Don't ye lie to us, you young rascal."

"My motter is never ter tell a lie where th' truth will do jest as well," declared Billy.

"Then you mean to say that you didn't know what we was talkin' about?"

"Prezackly, sir."

Tolego here asked something sharply in Spanish.

"Give it up," said Billy. "I haven't got my ears tuned fer any sick a lingo as that. If you want ter trade talk with me you will have ter come right down to good, plain, every-day Uncle Sam. I can't twitter anything else."

"I believe ye lie," declared Meens, bluntly.

"Can't help what ye believe," retorted Billy, "I am givin' it to ye as straight as a string."

The woman was still looking out of the window, but she took no part in the talk.

The three men looked at one another, as though questioning in their minds what was going to be done about it.

"Shall we let th' little devils go?" asked Willison.

"Durn me if I know," declared Meens. "What d'ye think about it, Tolego?"

"I think that the best thing we can do with them is to confine them here till we get Macareno's opinion about it. If they're spies, we don't want 'em spying around here, that is certain."

This was said in Spanish, and they all looked at Billy to see whether he understood or not.

As he did not, of course he could betray no signs that would arouse their further suspicions. But, even if he had understood, he was not the one to let his face or manner betray him.

Skinny stood near, in the grasp of the Mexican, and was looking around from one to another as though wondering what manner of death he was going to meet at their hands.

Some further talk was had in Spanish, and some things were said to test whether Billy or Skinny could understand that tongue or not.

The men were finally satisfied, apparently, that they could not understand it, though of course they could not be certain about it; and it was arranged that they were to be imprisoned in one of the stables until the return of Macareno.

"D'ye understand that?" demanded Willison. "Understand what?" asked Billy.

"You and your slender companion are to be imprisoned in one of the stables here until the master of the place comes home. You have been caught spying around here in a suspicious manner, and we cannot know but what you meant to break in and steal. It will teach you better than to do such work again, if you are innocent, and it won't do you any harm, anyhow."

"There's somethin' rotten in Denmark, and you don't have ter have a very keen nose ter smell it, either," commented Billy. "At first you raised th' cry of spy, and now you turn it over to thief. Oh! but we kin see as fur through a stone fence as th' next one, we kin, and you don't want ter forgit that as you go along."

"You will have ter answer to Mr. Gallardo fer this, see if ye don't," put in Skinny.

This remark caused the three rascals to halt again for a moment, holding a further debate in Spanish, but finally their course was fully decided upon.

"We will stand all the consequences," declared Meens. "Maybe you are not known to Gallardo as well as ye ought ter be, and your actions here certainly looks suspicious."

"You'd better take us over to his place, then," said Billy, "and I reckon he'll be responsible fer our good behavior."

"We've no time ter monkey," declared Willison. "Gallardo ain't at home, and we've got ter help find th' missing girls. Come along with you."

"Seems you've jest remembered th' hurry you was in," sneered Billy.

There was no help for the lads at present, and their captors led them away in the direction of the stables.

Skinny continued to growl and scold at Billy, laying all the blame of their mishap upon him, where it doubtless belonged, for it was Billy's daring that had got them into trouble.

When they reached the stables, the lads were taken into a small one that was empty, and there their hands were securely tied behind their backs.

"Shall we gag 'em, too?" asked Meens.

"No, it ain't necessary," decided Tolego, "for they can holler all they want to, and they won't get any help. I'll tell th' men, about 'em, and tell 'em to see that they don't get away."

"They can't get out, can they?"

"What, with their hands tied? Hardly."

"But you'll fasten th' door, won't ye?"

"Yes, of course; that can be hooked on the outside."

"Say," suggested Willison, "here are halters in these stalls; why not put 'em around their necks?"

The idea created a laugh.

"Just the thing," exclaimed Tolego; "that will make 'em doubly secure. We'll put one in each stall."

And they proceeded accordingly.

Billy was put in one stall, and Skinny in the other, and the leather halters were buckled around their necks.

"There, my bucking bronchos," laughed Willison, "see how you like that. You will have time to cool off here and repent of your spyin'. You'll be let out when Macareno comes, if he sees fit to let you go."

"Say," asked Billy, "haven't ye got some hay ter put in th' manger? We'll want somethin' ter feed on while we stay here."

"Feed on yer thoughts then," snapped Meens.

"That's th' driest kind of fodder," Billy declared, "and more so when a feller hasn't got any brains ter furnish thoughts with. That is my case. If I had more brain I would be better and happier than I am. Can't be helped, though; a feller can't allus have what he'd like ter have."

"If you had as much brain as tongue," declared Willison, "you would be heavy in th' upper story."

"Jest what I have allus thought myself. As it is, I have ter limp along through life th' best I can with th' little supply I've got. But, gentlemen, if you're in a hurry I won't detain ye longer. Ta-ta!"

Seeing that they meant to leave him and Skinny there, Billy was anxious to have them go. He did not want to be searched and disarmed.

The lads had each a revolver now, as their conversation has already shown, and in one instance at least Billy had found his of service.

"Yes, we'll go," said Willison, "for we haven't any more time to fool away with you."

"Yes, come on, echoed Tolego, "for we have spent too much time here already, and must be out on the trail."

They went out, and the two lads heard them secure the door after them.

Neither spoke until the men had gone away, and then Skinny broke out:

"Now, smarty, I hope you are satisfied. See what a pretty mess you have got us into. It is funny that you can't go anywhere nor do anything without gettin' inter trouble. Jest as like as not this will be th' last of us."

In answer, Billy whinnied like a horse and kicked the side of the stall.

"If I could kick through, Skinny," he declared, "I'd kick you till your bones would rattle in their slender coverin' of skin. You allus git me inter a diffikilty, and then try ter play innocent and lay all th' blame on me. It won't work that way. But, sweet pertaters! we are in a fix, ain't we! They say there is nothin' new under th' sun, but this is somethin' new in our experience, and that's a straight fact. Ha, ha, ha! Th' idee o' bein' tied up here by th' necks like two sick calves!"

"More like a jackass in your case," Skinny grumbled.

"There, now, Skinny. I didn't think you could be so unkind," complained Billy, in pretended injury. "I was goin' ter apply that ter you, but I couldn't find it in my heart ter be so cruel ter animals. This is somethin' that I never expected ter see you come to, my gay an' festive shadder."

"You better shut up and begin ter think how we're goin' ter git out o' the mess you've got us inter."

"Sweet pertaters! I feel it in my bones that we ain't goin' ter git out, my slender partner. We're goin' ter stay right here. Hands tied behind our backs, halters around our necks, and out of reach of each other; how d'ye think we kin git away? It looks ter me ter be about th' worst little diffikilty that we have been in for some period of while, and that's puttin' it plain and strong."

"I only wish we were back in New York," Skinny lamented.

CHAPTER X.

COMES A CLEW AT LAST.

WHEN Willison and Tolego rode away from the Macareno place, they headed for the Cantatriz.

By the time they arrived there the other party had returned from across the river and had started for the head of the lake, as shown.

The two went on to the river, crossed, and rode away out of sight on the other side. To follow them is unnecessary. Their object was merely to kill time, as may as well be stated and have done with.

When they returned it was after the main party, now with Mrs. Gallardo, had returned from the lake and had gone on toward the Millwall place.

On the return they rode furiously, and when finally they rode into the yard at Mr. Millwall's, their horses were pretty well winded.

"Have they been found?" Tolego asked, with earnest solicitude.

"No, they have not," snapped back Mr. Millwall, "and I would like to know how you came to be absent from this place without leave."

"I have no excuse to offer, sir," was the reply, "except that I set out late, and you had retired, as I supposed. I expected to be back by daylight."

"What took you over there in such haste, and by night, too?"

"That is a private matter which I do not care to make known. Believe me, sir, I am speaking the truth."

"And what brings you here?" turning suddenly upon young Willison.

"I am here to ask a favor," was the respectful reply.

"A favor, is it? What do you want now?"

"I want the favor of shelter for a day or two, and then help to get down to Mexico City, where I have the promise of a paying situation."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"It is altogether uncertain whether you are or not. Your word is worth nothing to me. Any young man who could—"

"There, there, Caleb," interrupted Mrs. Millwall, "no need to tell everything that is past, is there?"

"No, no, I suppose not," Mr. Millwall readily agreed, "but it makes my blood boil whenever I think of it. But, we'll say no more about it. I believe I told you never to set foot on my place again, did I not?" turning again to the young man.

"Yes, I know; but I am forced into it, this time. I must get to Mexico this week, and unless I get the help from you I cannot do it, and must lose the place that is promised me."

"Well, well, you can stay here to-night and if your aunt is willing to help you further, I shall not object. Keep out of my sight, however."

"Thank you, sir."

"You needn't."

Mr. Millwall had turned away, as though eager to choke back his rising anger, and a look of keenest satisfaction stole over the face of the young man.

It need not be said that time was hanging heavily on the hands of all.

Mr. and Mrs. Millwall were almost wild in their grief, and their son was but little less so.

Where the missing girls could be could not be guessed. But, now, since the adventure of Isidora Gallardo, it was believed that they were in the hands of brigands.

Old Lazarus Rockstone was the worst troubled of any, if whining and crying went to prove the depth of his feelings.

"Oh! my poor Alma, my poor Alma!" he moaned and groaned. "Will they never bring you back to me? That poor, dear child, that I so longed to make my wife; where can she be, where can she be?"

Tolego, the overseer for Millwall, had had a talk with Macareno, and had told him about the two prisoners.

The Spaniard's face darkened, at the news, and an evil light burned in his eyes.

Finally Pompey Daylight came back to report that he could find nothing of the lads, and that they had not been home to the Cantatriz place.

This caused a new breeze of excitement.

"Where can they be?" inquired Gallardo.

"Oh! they will turn up all right, I'll promise," cried Macareno.

"But, it is strange where they are," persisted Gallardo. "I am uneasy about them."

"I do not think we need be," declared Mr. Millwall. "They will turn up all in good time. There is no danger around here that they could run into."

"That is true, but I feel responsible for them, while they are here, you know, and must look after them. Oh! would that these ladies could be found, though, and then we should be free to act."

Pompey was sent back again, with orders to send out the remainder of the men at the place, and to come and report as soon as anything was heard of the lads.

The faithful old darky went off in all haste.

After noon the men began to return from various directions, but the reports they brought were all the same. They had heard nothing of the missing ones.

"This is getting to be unbearable," suddenly exclaimed Macareno. "What can we do, more than we are doing, or have done?"

"That is what I would like to know," echoed Paul Millwall. "I am tired of doing nothing."

"We must rouse up the whole county," declared Mr. Millwall. "If there is a band of outlaws here, we must hunt them down."

"Yes, yes, do something for that dear girl," croaked old Rockstone. "Bring her back to these loving arms, and Heaven will bless you."

"Something will happen to you that won't be a blessing, if you don't stop your infernal whining," warned Harry Strykers.

"Rash young man," was the mournful response, "you can never understand what true love is; such love as burns within my breast is like a consuming fire. It is devouring me by inches."

"It is a pity that it wouldn't get in its work a little faster, and make a job of it."

This created a laugh at the old fellow's expense, and he went off to a distant corner of the piazza to cry alone.

About this time Macareno spoke to Harry Strykers, evidently giving him some orders, and Harry set out for the Macareno place soon after.

A little later Macareno took his leave, saying that he had business that he must attend to, but that he would return before night, and lend his further assistance in the search.

He strongly advocated the raising of a big force and fairly scouring the whole country round for the lost girls.

"Macareno seems earnest enough in helping us, Paul," observed Mr. Millwall, when he was gone.

"Yes, so he seems to be," the young cattle king agreed, "but his interest is not unselfish, and I can't be friendly with him. He loves Erica, you know."

"Yes, so he does, but he knows now that there is no use in his looking longer in her direction, so I suppose he means to make the best of the situation."

"You may be right, at any rate I hope you are. I care not who finds them, so long as they are found and rescued."

"Nor I. I hope no harm has come to them."

Finally, later on, two men came riding up to the place, their horses almost ready to drop, and they about exhausted with their hard drive.

These men were two of Macareno's employees, both Mexicans.

"What word do you bring?" asked Paul Millwall, eagerly, addressing them in their own tongue.

"Yes, yes, what word do you bring?" echoed old Rockstone.

"The ladies have been seen," was the answer.

"Seen! Where?"

"In the mountains, and going in the direction of Soledad."

"Who saw them?"

"An old Indian woman whom we met on the trail."

"Did she know them? Come, out with your story."

"She said there were about twenty of the horsemen, and that the ladies were in their midst, prisoners. She described them so that we are sure there is no mistake. She did not know any of the men, and in fact said that they were masked."

"When was it she saw them?"

"This forenoon."

"We must pursue them!" cried Mr. Millwall. "We must follow them with all haste. Now at last we have a clue, and there is hope. Let us make ready and be off as soon as possible."

"Did you get from the Indian woman the exact place where she saw them?" asked Paul.

"Yes, she said it was on the old trail, and just beyond the carved rocks at the end of Passo Canyon."

"Good enough. We will set out for there as soon as we can."

All was soon bustle and excitement.

Horses were got out in all haste, a horn was sounded to call the men together, and in twenty minutes the party was off, Paul Millwall at the head.

As they did not have to go past the Macareno place in order to strike the best and nearest trail, they did not stop to send for him to join them. They had some of his men, and their force was large enough to cope with all the outlaws they expected to encounter.

As they turned out into the main road, on leaving the lane that led to the house, a horseman was seen coming from the south, and when he saw the party he put the spurs to his animal and hastened forward.

When he came up it was found to be Harry Strykers.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

The matter was quickly explained, and he was asked to join, which he was only too eager to do, and then they were off, leaving old Rockstone at the end of the lane waving his hat and shouting for them to bring his darling back to him.

They pushed on and on, at the best speed they dared assume without risk of wearing out their horses, and the miles were dropped behind them one after another in rapid succession.

Finally they were in the foot-hills, and it was now sundown.

"You know the way better than I do, Harry," said Paul, at this point, "and you had better take the lead."

"No, no, you are all right," was the response; "keep right on. We must use all the speed we can, too."

"It is strange that there is no signs of them yet."

"They must have come around by the south trail. We will find tracks when we come to that."

On they pushed, and finally the other trail was reached. It was now dark. A halt was called, and the ground was examined by matches. Not a hoof-mark was to be seen.

"What does it mean?" questioned Paul.

"I can't understand it," answered Harry. "Let us push on to the place where the Indian woman met them."

CHAPTER XI.

THE PARTNERS SLIP THEIR HALTERS.

BROADWAY BILLY and Skinny were in a decided "fix."

It was truly something new in their joint experience.

They had been prisoners before, to be sure, but never under such peculiar circumstances as the present.

Skinny's lament was that he had ever left New York.

He had, he declared, seen nothing but trouble since the day they had set out upon their trip.

Billy took a brighter view of it all, though he owned that they were in something of a "consarned diffikilty." He looked upon the bright side as well as upon the dark.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed, "we might be a heap worse off, Skinny, and that is prime truth. We are in good health, and sound and whole in body and limb, and it strikes me that that is a good deal ter be thankful fer. Oh! we might be heap worse off than we are, my weak and shadowy pard."

"I don't see how we well could be," Skinny croaked.

"Don't ye? Why, we are in clover, compared with what might be."

"I don't see it. Here we are, fast by th' hands and necks, and no way possible of gettin' away. If that ain't bad enough, then I'd like ter know what is."

"Sweet pertaters! but you are a chronic complainer, Skinny, and no discount on it. Jest s'pose, f'rinstance, that these halters was tied to th' beams overhead, and that we's standin' on wind about a foot clear of the floor; how would that suit you? Then you would have cause ter raise yer voice and wail a wail of lamentation."

"And jest as like as not that is what will happen as soon as th' boss villain of th' crew comes."

"It will be time enough ter raise our voices in gentle protest when th' danger is at hand. I don't believe in borrowin' trouble afore it's needed. There is generally enough on hand ter satisfy 'most anybody."

"I should say so. But, are we goin' ter stay here and take th' chances of gettin' hung? Ain't there some way that we kin git out?"

"There, now you're talkin' more like. What you want ter do is ter slip yer halter, I see, and kick out of th' stable. That is a highly commendable ambition, my feather-weight right bower, and I'm with ye. I'm bendin' my powerful intellect to th' problem now, and I hope ter git thar Eli in th' sweet by an' by. Do you see any ray o' hope peerin' through th' gloomy prospect of the sittywation, my gay an' festive lieutenant?"

"I wish you would stop yer foolin', Billy, and take this matter serious."

"Sweet per-ta-ters! What would ye call serious? Don't ye see th' great and numerous presps of headspiration standin' out on my manly brow like icicles on a tombstone? It is all caused by my anxiety fer you, my poor dear, boy. Ye see I don't know what your fate is ter be, unless they burn ye at th' stake. I have no doubt but they'll hang me, but they won't do that ter you."

"And why won't they hang me, too, I'd like ter know?"

"Well, they might try it, but it wouldn't be fatal. When you have been suspended fer an hour or so, and they cut ye down and found ye still alive and well, it would show 'em that you wasn't born ter be hanged, and they'd proceed ter desperate means forthwith."

"Billy, you are talkin' like a goose. Why

wouldn't hanging kill me as well as any one else?"

"Sweet pertaters! can't ye see? There wouldn't be enough weight in yer body ter make th' halter choke ye!"

"Oh! you git out!"

"Jest exactly what we want ter do, my blushing gladiolus. That seems ter be th' burden of your song o' sorrow, and I'm goin' ter screw up my thinker to th' high-pressure notch and see if I can't grind somethin' out of my think-box. It will never do fer sich a story as this, bein' cribbed in a stable like two donkeys and not knowin' enough ter git out, ter reach th' ears of Inspector Br— Hello! Sweet pertaters! Oh! Skinny! Jest stretch out yer hind leg through this crack here and kick me, will ye? Kick me real hard."

"Why, what's struck ye now?" Skinny eagerly demanded.

"Oh! I'm hit with an' idee, and it is so simple that I blush ter think of it. Can't you help me blush? If I have ter do it all myself there is danger that my blushes will set th' stable afire, for they are as red-hot as th' gal's that went ter sit down on a 'lectric light shadder and landed on th' floor. Jest see how light they are makin' th' stable appear. Can't ye—"

"Great ginger! What ails ye, anyhow?"

"Why, th' idee that hit me. What is ter binder us from untyn' these halters with our teeth? Ain't it a plain and simple knot, and ain't it right here in front of us on th' front of th' manger? Where was yer mind, Skinny, that ye didn't think of it long ago?"

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Skinny ejaculated. "I never once thought of that. Go ahead, Billy, and we'll see who will git clear first."

"That seems ter cheer ye up, I see. All right, go fer it, thin one, and I'll bet on you every time. Folks allus takes a thin thing ter pick a knot with, and you'd order make a good one."

At it they went, and in a little time Billy was free.

Again he whinnied like a horse, kicked the stall, and then pranced around into Skinny's apartment.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, "whoa, Dexter! Don't do any of yer fancy kickin', old boss, or I'll jest take th' big end of a whalebone to ye and make ye think that yer name was meant fer Dennis. Whoa, old feller!"

As he said this he approached Skinny, much as any one might enter the stall of a strange horse, patting him on the back and coaxing him to insure safety.

"Oh! stop yer foolin', will ye, and help me ter get loose!" cried Skinny, impatiently.

"That's what I'm here fer, my gay an' festive herring," Billy responded. "We are bound ter git out of this trap or know th' reason why. They can't keep us no more than ye kin keep oil in a paper box. Say, I'll back up ter you, if you'll promise not ter kick, and see if I can untie your hands. If I kin, then we will be all right."

Billy suited action to words, and set to work at the cords that held Skinny's wrists together.

In a little time he had them loose, and Skinny was free.

"There!" he exclaimed, "now you are all right, my shadowy trump, and you can do th' same for me. It will be a fair exchange of compliments, ye know."

Skinny had already cast the hated halter from his neck, and now he set to work to free Billy. It did not take long, and the lads were once again at liberty so far as the use of their limbs was concerned.

But, it still remained for them to get out of the stable, and then to get away from the place. Whether they would be able to do that remained to be seen.

"Now," said Billy, "th' next thing is somethin' else. How are we goin' ter git out of this petty prison?"

"I reckon it won't do no harm ter try th' door," suggested Skinny.

"No, perhaps not, frail one," agreed Billy.

They tried it, but it was only too well secured. There did not seem to be any hope of their getting out that way.

There was but one window to the place, and that was high up overhead, far out of the reach of the two lads.

There were two doors, the second a little one in the back part of the building, but that, like the larger one, was securely fastened.

"It is a dubious outlook, Skinny," observed Billy. "We have hunted for some outlet, but there don't seem ter be even a hole that you kin crawl through."

"It is no outlook at all," Skinny declared. "It would be a little satisfaction if we could look out."

"Hal there is somethin' in that thought, my lanky partner," cried Billy. "We'll see if we can't find a peep-hole somewhere."

"And we'd better not make too much of a racket in here," Skinny advised, "fer fear that some of th' men about th' place will pounce in upon us."

"I don't know but that would be jest th' best thing that could happen, if there wasn't too many of 'em," mused Billy. "We are armed, and we might make 'em stand out of th' way and let us go."

"And then again we mightn't. I don't think we'd better risk it."

"Well, mebbe not, if we kin git out in some other way. Hal here is a knot-hole, and I'll take a view of th' kentry around and see how th' lay of th' land is."

With that Billy applied his eye to the hole he had found, but quickly drew it away again, uttering an exclamation.

"Sweet pertaters!" he cried, "but there's no use o' thinkin' o' gettin' out this way, fer there is about a score o' fellers around th' place, and they'd pounce upon us in no time. We might be able to shoot some of 'em, but that wouldn't do us any good, if they got us after all."

"Well, what are we goin' ter do, then?"

"That is what we want ter know. Buckle yer mind right down to it, thin one, and see if you can't rake up an idee or two out o' that barren pate o' yours."

"And you do th' same, too."

"Say! Let's try th' floor. Mebbe we kin git out that way. At any rate it wouldn't require much of a hole ter let you out, and then you could go for help."

"All right, any way at all, so long as we get out somehow. I have no desire to be here when th' head rascal of all comes home. No knowin' what he'd take it inter his head ter do."

Billy was already at work, and was examining the floor all around.

In front of the stalls that have been mentioned was an open space, where there was some hay, some farming tools, etc.

In one corner stood a machine that looked like a fan-mill, and behind that, after some patient search, Billy found a loose board.

"Hal!" he exclaimed, "here we have it, my gallus skeleton!"

Skinny hastened to him, and together they pulled the board up.

An open space was revealed underneath, where there was room enough for them to squeeze through.

"In you go," Billy directed. "There is no time like th' present, where there is no choice about th' matter. Lead on, gentle one, and I'll foller, if I kin get in at all."

Skinny got down flat and crawled through the hole and in under the stable, and Billy followed.

The board was then let down into its place, and for the present, it seemed, they were out of the reach of their enemies.

As they looked around, however, and saw no light, it looked as though they had got out of the frying-pan only to find themselves in the fire.

"What d'ye think about it now?" asked Billy.

"I think we've got ter creep around and find th' way out," was the slim partner's response.

"Well, then, come on and we'll begin ter do our creepin'," said Billy, and he started off on a voyage of discovery in the dark and unknown regions they were in.

CHAPTER XII.

MAKING A COOL BARGAIN.

THEY were in no pleasant situation. It was dark, as said, and not only that, but dirty.

More than once their hands came into contact with rats as they crept along, and it seemed that the place was alive with them.

Presently Billy came to one of the stone foundations.

"Here is th' end in this direction," he announced.

"Well, now we must foller th' wall around," said Skinny.

"That seems ter be about it," agreed Billy.

"You go one way and I'll go th' other, my slender partner, and th' one that finds an openin' first kin chirp."

"All right, and I'm off."

That agreed upon, they parted, and each went feeling along the wall in a different direction.

Some minutes passed.

Billy was working along slowly and carefully, determined not to let any chance opening escape his notice.

Not that he expected to creep out rashly, perhaps into the hands of his enemies, but the sooner he found the means of getting out the better satisfied he would be. Perhaps they would have to remain there till darkness would favor them.

Finally he heard a chirp from Skinny.

Answering it, he began to creep across to where the thin partner was, and in due time reached him.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"Here's a big opening," Skinny explained.

"Where? I don't see anything of it."

"No, but you kin feel it. I reckon it leads under another buildin'."

"Oh! that's th' case, is it? Well, we'll foller it, anyhow."

Billy found that the opening was deep and wide, and that there seemed to be more room for action beyond.

They crept through, and then away off in one direction they caught a ray of light. This gave them new hope, and they started away toward it.

They had decided that they must be under the big barn of the farm, and they were not mistaken. The little stable joined the barn, and creeping out from under the one had brought them under the other.

When they came to the place where the light entered, they found that it came through a hole that had been left in the wall for the purpose of ventilation. It was about a foot wide by ten inches high.

"Well, here's a chance fer you, Skinny," observed Billy, "but I don't know whether I'll be able to get through or not."

"I guess you can do it, on a pinch," Skinny decided. "Are ye goin' ter venture out now?"

"Well, not in a big rush I ain't," was the answer. "S'pose you take a look out and see how th' land lays."

Skinny put his head through the opening, but drew it back again in haste.

"Two men are comin' this way," he announced.

"Mum is th' word now."

"Who are they?" asked Billy, in a whisper.

"Th' one you call Dago and another man."

Voices were heard then, and they came nearer, and finally the men stopped only a few feet away from the hole in the wall.

"Yes, I am done with you," Macareno was saying. "You shall go at once."

"And that is your only excuse, eh?" asked the other.

The second man was Harry Strykers.

"I consider it excuse enough," Macareno retorted. "You left the place without my permission, and for that reason I discharge you."

"Well, it is the weakest reason that I ever heard of, under the circumstances, sir. Last night you sent me to Tulare. When I returned this morning, you were not at home. I learned of the young lady's being missing, and as Miss Raleigh is my promised wife, I set out at once to aid in the search. I would do it again. I intend to go back to Millwall's as soon as possible."

"You can go, and stay. I shall put another man in your place at once."

"Very well, sir, but you do not want to forget that I am employed by the year, and that I shall demand a whole year's pay from you. If you do not pay it willingly, I can force you to pay it."

"Hal! are you sure of that?"

"Try it, and see. It will cost you more than the mere year's salary to test the case."

"Oh! well, we won't stop at that. You have only a few months' wages coming, anyhow. Come to the house and I will pay you in full."

"Very well. But, there is something back of this that I do not see at present. I suppose it will show itself soon enough, however."

"There is nothing back of it but my will and pleasure," declared Macareno. "I am tired of you, and you must go."

They had gone on now, and the two lads in hiding under the barn could hear no more.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, "but that is what I'd call th' grand bounce; how does it hit you, partner?"

"About ditto," answered Skinny. "Dago seems ter be right on his ear, don't he. Wonder what's th' matter with him."

"I give it up, and I don't care. I like th' way that th' other feller put it up his nose about th' wages. That was Harry Strykers, his over-seer."

"Well, what are we goin' ter do? Now is th' coast clear enough fer us ter get out o' here and make tracks fer other quarters?"

"I don't know about that. I think we'd better take our time about it. We don't want ter

get bagged again. Let me get there by th' hole and take a look around ter see what th' prospect is."

Skinny drew back from the hole and Billy crept to it and looked out.

That side of the barn faced the house, and a view of the yard and the lane that led down to the main road was to be had.

Macareno and Harry were just going into the house.

In front of the house, or rather at the side-front, stood a saddled horse, the bridle thrown over a hitching-post.

Several employees, Mexicans, were moving about, and Billy realized that he and Skinny could not venture out without great risk of discovery.

"I reckon we're booked ter stay here till night, Thinny," he remarked. "No great chance ter get away now, by th' looks o' things. We must use caution, and not git inter worse trouble than we have been in already. I think that is th' advice we would get from Inspector Br— Hello! Hang me if here don't come Snow-ball and Patsey McGinty."

"What are they doin' here?"

"That's what I'd like ter know."

"Call out to 'em, an' let's crawl out."

"Not so fast, my pippin! My detective instinct seems ter be on th' trail jest now, and I believe that there's somethin' rotten around this place. I want ter take a look around further afore I break away."

"Yes, and git inter further trouble."

"Not if I kin help it, Skinny. But, we know what sort o' fellers two of 'em is; namely, young Willison and his chum, and it is likely that there is more of th' same stamp around here."

McGinty and the darkey were seen to be talking earnestly with the employees as if making inquiries.

They evidently got no satisfaction, however, for they did not appear to be pleased with what they heard, and soon rode away again.

Some time later Harry Strykers came out of the house, sprung into the saddle, and disappeared.

Billy and Skinny finally decided that the best thing for them to do was to remain right where they were till night.

Billy wanted to be on hand at the Millwall place at midnight, to take a hand in Mr. Jacob Willison's little game, to baffle it if he could, and they must not run the risk of recapture, now that they were so near free.

Macareno came out of the house, after awhile, and moved toward the barn—the man, Meens, with him.

They talked as they moved along, stopping now and then, and soon were near enough for the lads to overhear their words.

"Yes, you can have the place," Macareno was saying. "I had to get rid of Strykers, of course, and must put some one in his place."

"But, I don't know that I want it bad," Meens demurred.

"What! Not want it! Why, man, where can you better yourself?"

"Why, I think I've got a better snap in view. Young Willison is goin' ter make a bold stroke fer his rights, and I'm ter share with him."

"Oh-ho! Well, take the place for the present, until this matter of the missing girls is settled."

"Well, I s'pose I can do that."

"And then if young Willison get's tripped up in his plans, you will be all right, anyhow."

"There's a good deal in that. I'll do it."

"Good enough. Now, what about the prisoners in th' stable? I am afraid they know too much for our good."

"I believe they kem here ter spy, that's what I believe about 'em. But, they are safe now, you can bet on that."

"But, what is going to be done with them?"

"That is fer you ter say."

"And I don't know. I am afraid to keep them, for I will have to answer to Gallardo if I do, and I am afraid to let them go before this night is past. I don't know how much they may have found out, you see."

"May as well be hanged fer a sheep as a lamb," commented Meens. "You'll have ter tell Gallardo, anyhow, and make some sort of excuse ter him, and if you keep 'em till mornin' you can swear that you didn't know anything about it till then."

"But the boys will tell a different story. I tell you what it is, as long as no one knows they are here it wouldn't be a bad idee to make away with them. What are they good for, anyhow? Couldn't we do that?"

"It might be done, if there was money enough behind th' job."

"Well, what will you do it for? Come, now, right down to business."

"You don't mean kill 'em, of course," with a meaning grin.

"Of course not!" with pretended earnestness.

"All you want is to have them put away so that they won't come back. So you won't never hear from them again."

"Exactly."

"Well, if you say a thousand, I'll take care that they are sent off in th' most approved style."

"I'll pay the price."

They moved on, and no more of their talk could be heard.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOME STARTLING DISCLOSURES.

"WHAT d'ye think o' that, my gay an' festive sign o' famine?" demanded Billy. "I reckon we are some better off here than we would be in th' stable, don't you?"

"Great ginger, yes!" assented Skinny. "They'd kill us, sure."

"It looks that way, partner, and that's a dismal fact. But they have got ter git us first, and we have got a fair show fer our white alley yet."

"We don't want ter show our noses, though."

"No, sir; not yet! And if we git away without trouble we will be lucky."

"Won't there be a howl when they find we're gone?"

"There quite probably will, and they'll make a hot search fer us, too. If they git too warm after us we'll have ter open fire on 'em, that's all. And we'll mean business every shot, too!"

Just then angry voices were heard at a little distance away to the right.

"Sweet pertaters! Now we're in fer it!" exclaimed Billy. "They've discovered our gone-ness, Skinny, sure's you're born."

Loud calling and answering were heard, in different directions, but all in Spanish.

Billy, looking out, saw men running this way and that, and it was clear that some excitement had sprung up.

The lads had guessed aright in supposing that it was the discovery of their escape that caused it all.

Meens had opened the stable-door, to make sure that they were still there, Macareno standing out of sight so that they might not see him, but the moment the door was opened Meens sprung in with an oath.

"They're gone!" he cried.

"Gone!" exclaimed Macareno.

"Yas, gone; and I'd like ter know how they got away, too. They had their hands tied behind their backs, and had halters around their necks. Besides, th' doors was both fastened on th' outside. It beats hot-place how they got out!"

Then followed the excitement, as mentioned.

The men were called and questioned, but they one and all declared that their eyes had hardly been off the stable since the boys had been in there. They were sure that they had not got out. They had heard them talking, too, whenever they had been near the doors.

It was a puzzle, but it was one that Meens and Macareno meant to solve in as short a time as possible.

Throwing open the doors, they proceeded to examine well the whole place, and it was not long before they discovered the loose board in the floor behind the fan-mill, and the fact that the dust was cleared from it proved that it had been raised.

Having made this discovery, it was plain how the lads had got away.

"This heur explains it all!" cried Meens in English; "they have gone under th' stable and got out that way."

This remark Billy and Skinny overheard.

"Great ginger!" cried Skinny, "now we are in fer it, sure."

"Never say die," encouraged Billy. "They haven't got us yet, little one, and I don't mean they shall, either. If they foller us in here it will be a hot spot for 'em, and that's prime fact."

"Can't we make 'em think that we have got out and gone?"

"How my noble lieutenant?"

"Why, by makin' some sort of marks in th' dirt outside of this hole."

"Skinny, you're a jewel!" cried Billy. "If we wasn't in such close quarters I'd take ye to my breast and embrace ye. You are th' brains of th' combination. That is what we'll do."

Billy had found a stick in his wanderings un-

der the barn, and with that he reached through the hole and made some scratches in the ground outside.

That done, he threw out some of the litter from the ground under the barn.

"There," he observed, as he looked out, "if that don't mislead 'em you kin tickle me with a shingle. They'll think we're gone, sure. You deserve a vote of thanks, noble youth, and I hereby tender it to ye."

In the mean time the men had not been idle.

"Where could they get out?" demanded Meens, as soon as his discovery was made.

"There's only one hole," answered Macareno, "and that is under the big barn. I'll go there and see if any trace of them can be seen."

He started off, and barely had the lads ceased talking when they saw his form darken the opening.

They had already taken care to draw back where they could not be seen.

"Carrambol!" the rascally Spaniard cried, "but they are gone!"

"Be ye sure?" asked Meens, who had followed right after him.

"Yes; see the marks here where they have crawled out of the hole."

"Right you are, and now what is to be done?"

"That is what I'd like to know. They've struck out for the Cantatriz place, I have no doubt, and there they'll tell a pretty tale."

"You'd better ride over there, tell th' story your way, and make yer 'pology fer their bein' taken prisoners. You kin lay th' blame on yer men, ye see."

"Yes, that's what I'll have ter do. In a day or two I won't care a snap for any of them, but just at present I do, for I am not out of the woods yet."

"No, but th' way is all clear now."

"Yes, I think it is. To-might I'll start the girls for Mexico, as arranged, and in a week or so I'll follow. No one can ever suspect the truth, you see, and before a month is done Erica Willison shall be my bride."

Here was a pointer that fairly caused Billy and Skinny to catch their breath. Macareno was, then, the big villain in the play!

"What time will they start?"

"About two o'clock in the morning, I guess, will be the best hour. You see Millwall and all the others have gone off on that blind trail to the mountains, and they can't get back before about three o'clock. By that time my men with the girls can be a dozen miles down the river."

"Oh! it is bound to work. You are a deep one, senior, and no mistake."

"I was determined to have that pretty girl for my wife, in spite of a dozen Paul Millwalls, and have her I will."

Others of the men were now gathering around them, and they ceased talking in that line.

"They have got away," Macareno announced, in Spanish; and he called attention to the marks on the ground.

No further proof was wanting, and they all moved off.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed the Broadway representative; "don't it jest snatch th' dilapidated garment from th' buckleberry bush? We have got hold o' this mystery at th' business end, now, my gay an' festive shadder, and it is fer us ter git in our fine work and baffle th' hull game."

"And I'm with ye, Billy, teeth and toe-nails! If we kin bring them up with a round turn, let's do it. They meant ter kill us fast enough and it will be jest immense ter put it up their noses."

"Ha! th' fever is after ye at last, is it? I'm glad of it. But, we can't do much till we kin git out of here, and we can't do that till it is dark so they can't see us."

"Where d'ye s'pose th' girls is?"

"I'll bet a cent that they're in th' house here."

"And so do I. That bein' the case, though, how are we goin' ter git 'em out? It will be a ticklish job."

"Never mind, we have handled jest sich jobs before, and we won't weaken at this one. If we don't make their hair curl afore we're done with 'em it won't be our fault. If we can't do it alone, we kin go fer help, that's all, and we'll have th' den pulled down, if necessary."

They were talking in low tones now, and had again moved near to the hole in the wall.

Billy looked out, and found that the men had all gone in the direction of the house.

One was leading a horse in that direction.

In a few minutes Macareno came out of the house, as he had disappeared for the moment,

and mounting the horse he rode down the lane and disappeared.

"He's gone over to th' Cantatriz place," Billy observed. "Oh! but he is a bad one, is that same Mackarony, and it will do me good ter see him brought to account fer his evil deeds."

Just then a crash was heard, and it was followed by another and another, and then came a cry for help in a woman's voice.

"Great ginger!" cried Skinny, "what's that?"

"Sweet pertaters!" from Billy, "I kin see, one of the gals in th' house there has bu'sted th' window open with a chair, and is hollerin' fer help. Ha! somebody has yanked her back out of sight, and is closin' th' window. Oh! but this game is growin' red-hot, partner, and my blood is jest a-boilin' ter take a hand in it. I wish it was night now."

"It soon will be, fer it is growin' dusk."

"You're right. We are onto th' racket in good shape, now, and if we could only git over to Millwall's and put a flea in Paul's ear—"

"He ain't there," Skinny reminded. "Didn't Dago say that he had sent 'em off on a blind trail?"

"Right you are. Seems ter me that this thing is goin' ter fall on us, Skinny, like a ton o' bricks. We must screw up our nerves fer it, when th' time comes. I bet if it comes ter shootin' that there'll be some blood on th' moon afore we're done."

The window had been again closed, and all was silent, but now the prison-place of the two girls was known, and if they were not rescued it would be because it did not lay in the power of Broadway Billy to lend them any assistance.

Billy studied the surroundings. The window was that of an up-stairs room, and might be reached with a ladder, but, was the ladder to be had?

The brave lad looked all around, and finally discovered what looked to be a ladder lying on the ground near a fence that ran alongside the house.

If it proved to be one, he meant to venture a climb to that window as soon as darkness came and the coast was clear.

Just before dark Jacob Willison rode into the yard.

Pretending that his horse was lame, he had returned, leaving the rescue party to go on upon the false trail.

Soon after him came Macareno.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PARTNERS TO THE RESCUE.

It seemed to the boys as though night would never come, but it was already at hand, and gradually it settled down and it was dark.

And then, and not till then, did they venture to leave their place of hiding.

Skinny crept out first, without any trouble, and then Billy made the attempt to follow.

He got his head and shoulders through, and wiggled on a little further, but finally he stuck fast.

He found he could go neither ahead nor back.

"Sweet pertaters!" he whispered, "but I'm in a fix now, fer sure. Reckon you will have ter lift th' barn, Skinny. I know I make a good deal of sport at you, partner, but I begin ter see that there is some advantage in bein' lean after all. Say, what am I ter do?"

"If you'd only think of all th' mean things you've ever done," advised Skinny, "you'd feel so small that you'd be able ter git out with ease."

"Oh! you go 'long. Say, jest get hold and pull, will ye?"

Skinny did as directed, and after some little effort Billy was finally safe on the outside.

"I've heard about folks bein' pulled through knot-holes," he muttered, as he rubbed himself, "but I don't want any more of it, if you please. If knot-holes is any tighter than that one, they're not holes that I want ter tackle."

"Ugh! you make me feel sick," declared Skinny. "If you had only got off that weak-kneed pun while you was fast, you would have slipped right through. It's th' slimmest one that I ever heard."

"Mebbe it was th' pun that stuck, and not me. But, here we are out, and now th' next thing is somethin' else. Don't dare ter speak above a whisper, little one, or I'll be tempted ter choke ye."

"What are ye goin' ter do now?"

"We'll see about that ladder, as I said. 'If it is one, we'll take a look in at that winder or fail in th' tempt."

"Yes, and git nabbed ag'in. We'd better go right off fer help and make a sure job o' it."

"I've been thinkin' about that, partner."

"S'pose we go fer help an' bring 'em here, old Mackarony would put a lie down our necks. He'd swear it wasn't so about th' girls bein' here, and he wouldn't let us inter the house, and there we'd be."

"But it would block his takin' th' girls away jest th' same."

"Yes, that's so; but I've got my mind set on th' ladder, and I'm goin' ter try that plan first. When we git it up at th' window you kin dodge off out off th' way, and then if I git nabbed you kin go fer help."

"Well, come on, then, if you're bound ter risk it."

They moved off to where Billy had seen the thing that he had taken to be a ladder, and when they came to the place they found that it was one.

"Hal! this is jest what we want!" Billy cried. "Now, if we kin only move it and put it up against th' house without bein' found out, it will be all right."

"And I feel doubtful about our doin' it," declared Skinny. "I feel pooty weak after our loag fast, I kin tell ye."

"We'll try it, anyhow, but I think we'd better wait awhile first, fer th' place ain't quiet enough yet fer safety."

"S'pose there's a big dog around."

"There goes yer wet blanket again. If there is one, I'll be safe. Dogs has a likin' fer bones, and while he is gnawin' at you I kin make my 'scape."

They sat down on the ladder, in the darkness, to wait for time.

A dim light was to be seen coming from the window where the prisoners were, but not a sound was to be heard from that direction.

An hour passed, and the place became quiet.

As soon as they thought they dared make the venture, the two lads laid hold upon the ladder and dragged it toward the house.

It was heavy, but they bent their strength to the task, and in a little time had it where they wanted it. Of course they had had to move with care, in order not to make any noise that could draw attention to them.

Carrying the big end of the ladder close to under the window where the light could be seen, they went to the small end and began to lift it.

They had it about half-way up, when a door was heard to open and some one came out into the yard.

Skinny gave a start, and was about to drop the ladder and run, when a word in whisper detained him.

"Keep right still," Billy whispered, "and don't move. Mebbey they won't see us, and if they do we'll drop it then and fight."

There proved to be two persons who came out of the house, and they passed not a dozen yards from where the lads were standing.

The boys could see them, but as they had just come out of the light the darkness to them appeared greater than it really was.

They were talking, and they proved to be Meens and Willison.

"You won't fail to be at the landin', then?" Willison was saying, as they passed.

"Oh, no, I'll be there, sure enough," Meens assured. "You'll find me on hand at th' hour you said."

"All right. I'll be there at twelve, or a little later. Things couldn't have turned out better than they have. There'll be no one in th' house but my aunt, unless Mrs. Gallardo is there, and I'll have no trouble in getting at the papers."

"Fortune seems ter be favorin' you, and that's a fact."

They passed on, and were soon beyond hearing.

"We'll see how much fortune will favor ye," muttered Broadway Billy. "If we kin only git in our fine work, Skinny, my pard, we'll show them a trick that will surprise them, you bet. Now then, up with th' ladder, and don't let it hit th' house hard when it goes up."

They exerted their strength once more, and up the ladder rose, slowly but surely, and finally its end rested against the house, at the side of the window.

"There, that's all right, so far," said Billy, "and now we must pull out th' bottom a little and it will be O. K. Grab bolt, my trusted right-bower, and we'll see what we kin do."

Their talking was in whispers, of course, and they were exercising all the caution possible.

They laid firm hold upon the ladder, and raising it with care, carried the bottom out to a safe distance and put it down.

This had caused a slight scraping sound, as the end of the ladder moved down the side of the house, but it was not loud enough to draw attention.

"There, now we are ready fer further business," said Billy. "Now, Skinny, you git over th' fence there and hide in th' wheat, and if you hear me holler you will know that I am nabbed. Then you go fer help on th' double-quick. If you don't hear me holler, stand yer ground. If any one comes here to th' ladder, you kin peg a stone against th' house ter warn me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand all right," said Skinny. "But, Billy, do take care and don't get inter any more trouble."

"I'll try to, my honest pippin, you bet. Good-by, and if I don't see you again in this world I'll keep my eye open fer your frail spirit when you make your daboo inter th' next."

They shook hands, and Skinny got over the fence and stationed himself out in the wheat.

When he was gone Billy mounted the ladder.

He was soon at the window where the light was, and, peering in at the broken blinds, he saw two ladies lying on the floor, their hands and feet tied, and their mouths gagged so that they could not make any outcry.

The window was a wreck and the shutters were held together by a string.

That was quickly broken, and pulling the shutters open, Billy reached in with his hat and fanned out the light, which happened to stand where he could almost reach it.

"Hist!" he then whispered; "I'm a friend. Don't make a move nor a sound, and I'll soon set ye free."

That caution given, he raised the broken sash as silently as he could, and that done, climbed into the room.

Stopping to listen, to find whether any one was moving or not, and hearing no suspicious sounds, he moved forward to where the ladies were lying and proceeded to cut their bonds.

It was soon done, and they were freed.

"Hist!" he whispered again; "do not make a noise of any kind that can be heard out of this room. Your escape depends on your silence."

"Who are you?" one of the girls asked.

"I am a lad that's visitin' at the Cantatriz place," Billy replied.

"And how did you learn that we were here?"

"Oh, by puttin' two and two together, I reckon," Billy answered to that. "It was mainly by your breakin' th' window, though. But, come, this is no time ter chin. Can you climb down a ladder?"

"We can do anything that promises escape from this house," was the assurance.

"That's jest th' talk. Come, I'll help ye out th' window, and when ye reach th' ground ye want ter stand still till I git down ter guide ye."

"All right, we will do just as you say."

Billy stepped back to the window, and one of the young ladies presented herself to be helped out.

With firm hand Billy assisted her till she was fairly out upon the ladder, and then whispered for her to go down.

That she did, and in a few seconds was safely at the bottom. Then her companion was helped out in the same manner, and when she had reached the ground Billy lost no time in following them.

"I shall have to ask you to climb the fence," he said. "As soon as we are in th' wheat we shall feel pretty sure of escape."

The girls were only too glad to be directed, and were ready to earn their escape at almost any cost, and they were over the fence about as soon as Billy could get over himself.

Skinny came up, then, and Billy introduced him in his usually quaint way.

"Don't be frightened at this shadder, ladies," he whispered, "it's only my partuer. He is a good fellow, Skinny is, but awfully thin. I don't know whether ye see him or not, but I'll tell ye he's here so that ye won't be scared if he should chance ter catch her eye."

"We'd better be goin', Billy," Skinny whispered, "and not fool away any time here. We ain't out of the woods yet."

"I don't know but you're right, slender youth, so we'll be off. This way, if you please, ladies, and we'll soon be safe."

CHAPTER XV.

ONE GAME BAFFLED.

THEY all pushed forward, and in a little time were out upon the main road.

"Thank goodness!" ejaculated Erica Willison, "now I can breathe freely once more. Oh! brave, noble boys! how can we ever thank you for what you have done for us? We owe a debt that can never be repaid."

"Indeed, no!" echoed Alma Raleigh. "We

owe our lives to you, and words cannot express our grat—"

"Oh! please spare us," interrupted Billy. "We haven't done anything so wonderful. If you want ter thank us, though, or show your appreciation of what we have done fer ye, jest listen ter th' oracle."

"Listen to what?" they both asked.

"Listen to th' oracle, which same is me—yours truly. We want to go to th' Cantatriz place fer th' present."

"Oh! no!" cried Erica, "we cannot do that; we must go home. They will think we are dead."

"You didn't hear me out," insisted Billy. "Everybody is out lookin' fer you, and Mr. Millwall, Paul, Harry Strykers and all th' rest of 'em have gone off into th' mountains on a false trail that Dago Mackarony put 'em on. While they are gone it is planned ter rob Mr. Millwall's house. I and my partner have got ter go to th' Cantatriz place fer help ter baffle their little game, and that will be th' only safe place fer you ter stay till mornin'. No one kin know that you are there, and you will be as safe as you would be at home. I don't know whether Mrs. Gallardo is there or not, but if not she is over with Mrs. Millwall. Come, what d'ye say?"

"Who is Mrs. Gallardo?" they both asked.

"Why, Isidora Cantatriz that was. She's jest been gettin' hooked up to Pablo Gallardo."

"Oh! indeed! Well, we will do as you desire, for, only for you we would not be free at all."

"That's th' talk!" explained Billy. "We'll amble right along, and th' sooner we get there th' better."

They set off, still talking, and in due time were at the Cantatriz farm mansion.

Billy rapped at the door, and the voice of Pompey Daylight was heard demanding:

"Who am dar?"

"It's me, Moonshine," answered Billy. "Open th' door and let us in."

"Ho, ho, ho!" the darky laughed, as he proceeded to unfasten the door, "ain't yo' nebbegwine git my name? Hit am Daylight, sah; Daylight."

"It's all th' same as long as I don't get any further away from it than that," Billy declared.

"Whar hab yo' been, anyhow, boys?" the old darky demanded, as he threw open the door. "I 'clar' we has looked all ober— What! an' de missin' ladies too! Goodness, what hab been goin' on, anyhow?" yo' is jes' immense, yo' is!"

They all entered the house, and Billy rattled off an explanation of the affair in as few words as possible, and then added: "Pomp, we are about famished fer somethin' ter eat, we haven't had a taste of anything sence mornin' and if you'll jest trot us out a bit we'll tackle it with as keen a relish as you ever dreamed of."

"Golly! yo' shall hab all yo' wants."

The darky hastened out, and soon had a tempting repast spread for the lads.

Billy and Skinny fell to with a will, and while they were eating Billy gave the darky instructions, taking it upon himself to assure him that it was the will of his young mistress that he should do just as he, Billy, said.

He directed him to get Patsey McGinty, and as many men as could be spared from the place, leaving enough to guard the ladies, and to be ready to set out on foot as soon as he and his thin partner ended their meal.

Pompey took hold with a will, and in a very few minutes had the force ready.

When McGinty came in Billy laid the whole matter before them, and explained his plan in detail.

If no discovery had been made of the escape of the two young ladies by the time they got to the Macareno place, McGinty and half a dozen of the men were to go up the ladder and take up their station in the room. Then, when Macareno and his tools came in to carry the ladies off they were to take them prisoners.

In the mean time Billy, Skinny, Pompey and one other would go on to the Millwall place and attend to the capture of young Willison and his accomplice.

When the lads had their fill of "grub" they set out, leaving the two ladies in charge of the house.

They "allowed no grass to grow under their feet," but when they neared the Macareno place they moved along as silently as shadows.

Making their way through the wheat to the rear, they came to the place where the ladder rested against the house, and found it there just as they had left it. There was still no light in the room, and they had every reason to believe that the discovery had not yet been made.

McGinty led the way up to the window, the others following him, and in a few minutes they

were safely in the room and hardly a sound had been made.

That done, Billy and the others went to the Millwall place.

By the time they reached there it was getting late, but they had still some time to wait before midnight would be at hand.

They stopped and held a conference, and it was decided that about the best time to take young Willison would be when he emerged from the house.

The night was warm, so they sat down along the fence to wait, two in front of the house and two in the rear. Billy and a Mexican named Pedro making one couple, and Skinny and Pompey the other.

They had a long wait, but finally a glimmer of light was seen moving at one of the upper windows on the side of the house Billy was on.

Billy and his companion were ready, near the door, to nab their man the moment he appeared, their weapons in hand.

Finally a click was heard in the lock; the door opened carefully and silently a man stepped out. It was the man they wanted, and the two stood ready to receive him as soon as he stepped from the piazza.

Closing the door softly behind him, the fellow crossed the piazza on tip-toe and stepped down to the ground.

The moment his feet touched ground, Billy and the Mexican were before him.

"Up with your hands, Jake Willison!" Billy ordered, sternly, "or we will build a couple of tunnels through your carcass before you can wink your off eye!"

Both had grabbed him in the same instant, and their pistols were pressed against his head in no pleasant manner.

Willison muttered an oath, but his hands went up.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

"I'm Broadway Billy, at your service," responded Billy. "You don't want to move, I can tell you, for my finger is just as likely to crook as not, if you excite me even a little bit, and this bullet will jump into you before I can stop it. Pedro, tie his hands!"

"Let me go, for Heaven sakes let me go!" Willison pleaded. "I never done anything to you, and you order let me down. Let me go!"

"Nary a let go, unless you want ter go out o' th' body," declared Billy, in his most decisive tone. "You are a prisoner, and a prisoner you'll stay."

The Mexican had made no delay about binding him, and in a few moments he was made secure.

As soon as that was done Billy knocked at the door.

A light soon appeared, and a voice demanded:

"Who is it?"

"It is I, Broadway Billy," was the answer.

"Please open the door, Mrs. Millwall."

"Oh! it is Billy!" cried the voice of Isidora.

"Yes, you shall come in in a moment."

In a little time they were down and the door was opened to them. As it was a spring lock, it had locked when closed by Willison.

Skinny and Pompey had run around from the rear, hearing the talking, and were now on hand.

"You must excuse me for calling you up at this hour, Mrs. Millwall," said Billy, "but I have just arrested this rascal as he was making off with some valuable papers that belong to Mr. Millwall. I heard him plot the thing, and laid for him."

"Jacob! Is it possible?"

"It is false!" the rascal cried. "It is a lie!"

"We'll see about that," said Billy, and he stepped forward and felt in the fellow's pockets.

He soon drew out a paper that looked like a legal document, and handing it to Mrs. Millwall, she recognized it immediately.

"Rascal!" she exclaimed, "you intended to rob your sister of her rights! I am done with you forever, now—detestable wretch that you are!"

"That's th' kind of a hairpin he is," declared Billy. "Now, Pedro," he added, "you stay here and guard him, and we'll go after th' other rascal. Don't let him go, or it will be the worse for you."

"Si, senor," was the response, and the Mexican sat down, revolver in hand, to guard the man.

Billy, Skinny and Pompey left the house and went through the garden and down to the river.

When they came to the landing, Billy advanced alone to the edge of the tule, where he stopped and whispered, hoarsely:

"Hey! Joe!"

"Here!" was the response, from the direction of the water, and some one was heard to move in a boat.

"Come ashore," Billy whispered, "I've got something I can't manage alone."

The man was heard to get from the boat to the planks of the landing, and then to walk toward the shore.

"Where are ye?" he asked, stopping.

"Right here," answered Billy; "come on."

Mr. Meens came on, and the next moment he found himself a prisoner, with three revolvers pressed to his head. His little game was up.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE rascal cursed roundly, with a great variety of choice epithets, but that did not help his case any.

He was soon made secure, and was marched to the house, where he was given a place of honor at the side of young Willison.

Both the Mexican and Pompey Daylight were now left there, and Billy and Skinny set out in haste for the Macareno place, anxious to learn how matters were progressing there.

When they came to the rear of the house, everything appeared to be about the same as when they had gone away, and Billy uttered a signal that had been agreed upon. It was answered immediately by the chirp of a cricket at the window.

Billy chirped in response, and he and Skinny ascended the ladder.

When they gained the room McGinty informed them that nothing had happened during their absence, and they sat down to wait with the others.

It was an hour later, perhaps, when cautious footsteps were heard below.

This lasted for some minutes, and then several feet were heard on the stairs, and on the door of the room.

"Ready!" whispered Billy, "and every revolver in sight."

The door opened, and in stepped a woman, with lamp in hand, followed by Macareno and two of his rascally tools.

"Up with yer flippers, Dago Mackarony!" cried Billy. "Up with 'em! or we'll give ye a dose o' lead pills that will wind up yer earthly jig in short meter!"

"Carrambo! What means this?" the frightened rascal demanded, as he complied with the urgent request.

"It means real old biz, that's what it means," declared Billy, "and you'll be likely ter find out that it does, too. Make 'em fast, McGinty, and we'll take 'em along with us."

"This is an outrage! I won't stand it! What right—"

"There, there, now, that won't do you one bit of good," Billy warned, "so you may jest as well take it easy. Make 'em fast, boys, and we'll have a big surprise fer th' Millwall party when they return."

In the mean time Mr. Millwall, Paul, and the party had pressed on.

Finally they came to Passo Canyon, and then to the point where it had been reported that the Indian woman had seen the missing girls in the hands of a band of masked men.

There the ground was examined with care, by the light of matches and lighted papers, but not a mark of recent tracks was to be seen.

"There is some trick in all this!" cried Paul Millwall. "We have been sent off on this blind trail purposely. What can it mean? Who is at the bottom of it?"

"It means something," agreed Harry Strykers, "but no knowing what. Let us get back again in all haste. We have been badly fooled."

"And Satan help the man that fooled us!" grated Mr. Millwall. "He shall answer for it."

They turned and started to retrace their weary way, and at a very late hour, worn out and discouraged, they rode into the Millwall place and dismounted.

Lights were to be seen in the house, and suddenly the doors were flung open, and the missing girls themselves ran out to greet them. They had been brought over from the Cantatriz place, after the arrest of the rascals, to make the surprise complete when the searchers should return.

And such a time as followed then can hardly be described.

All went into the house, where the prisoners were, and no sooner were they in than Broadway Billy drew a weapon upon Ricardo Tolego and Marcos Veedor, and ordered them to be arrested, too.

They were, and then Billy "took the floor" and made an expose of the whole rascally plot,

which he had forced from one of the prisoners while waiting for the party to come.

To give it in Billy's own words would be to carry our story beyond limits.

Diego Macareno loved Erica Willison, and was determined to have her. Marcos Veedor had the same designs toward Isidora Cantatriz. And it was the same with Ricardo Tolego with respect to Alma Raleigh. Macareno engaged these fellows to help him get Erica into his power, promising them his support in trying to get Isidora and Alma for themselves. Knowing that Paul Millwall was about to come home that day, action had to be taken immediately, or not at all. It was hastily planned and hastily carried out. The two girls were stolen, and Veedor killed the two dogs at the Cantatriz place so that they could not be used to hunt them.

Joel Meens had been the one who had lured the girls out of the house on the night of their disappearance. He called to them, saying that he was Harry Strykers, and that he wanted to see Alma. As Alma and Erica had been meeting Harry in the garden in the evening, they suspected nothing, but went down and out. When they came to the garden gate they were roughly seized and carried away, one by Meens and the other by Veedor. A piece of Alma's dress was left on the sharp nail in the gate-post, and further on she tore the gold braid from her captor's hat, that was found by Billy. They were taken in a boat to the Macareno place, and had at no time been any further away than that.

It was some of their helpers that stole Mrs. Gallardo on the following day, but she proved too much for them, as shown. And on that occasion it was a traitor at the Cantatriz place who had locked the stable doors.

Billy rattled on, bringing out every point that has been made known to or can be easily guessed by the reader, and when he was done a cheer greeted him.

Paul Millwall jumped up and seized both his hands.

"My lad," he cried, "you are a tartar! You have got to go to Texas with me and spend the winter. We'll teach you to ride, shoot and everything else, and then you will be a terror!"

The rascals were dealt with severely.

All of them were committed to jail, and the prospect of State's prison was good for every one of them.

Jacob Willison was among the number. He had once previously robbed Mr. Millwall of money and papers, and now it was his plan to rob his sister of property that was rightfully hers.

If he got hold of a certain paper, and could get a signature to it, and a man to swear that it was genuine and his as a witness, he could carry his point. Meens was the man he had chosen to help him. But their game was baffled. Both met with the fate they richly deserved.

And old Lazarus Rockstone, he was sent off whining. Paul Millwall advanced the money to Harry Strykers to take up the mortgage the old Snylock held, and Harry forced him to sell it out. That settled his case for once and all.

In a few days there were two weddings at the Millwall place. One was that of Paul and Erica, and the other that of Harry and Alma.

It was a joyous time, and Broadway Billy and Skinny were the heroes of the hour.

The two lads finished their visit with Mr. and Mrs. Gallardo, and enjoyed the sail on the lake and the trip to the big trees after all.

Then, as Paul and Harry, with their brides, were about to set out for the big ranch in Texas, Paul insisted that the boys should accompany them, and would not take no for answer.

Billy's plans had been otherwise. He and Skinny had promised their sailor friend, partly, that they would rejoin him when his cargo ran out, and sail with him on up to Washington, where he was going; and now to accept this new invitation, that one had to be discarded.

Finally they decided to go with Paul, and wrote their sailor friend to that effect, promising that they would meet him again sooner or later.

They sent for their trunk, and when the Texas party set out, Billy and his thin partner were numbered with it as honored guests.

Their parting with Mr. and Mrs. Gallardo, as well as from Mr. and Mrs. Millwall, was warm and sincere, and they were wished the best of good luck.

Patsey McGinty and Pompey Daylight, too, were hearty in their good wishes.

And so they set out for a fresh field, where adventure was pretty certain to be plenty.

THE END.

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